ELEMENTS IN A THEOLOGY OF ENVIRONMENT

by David E. Engel

In recent days we have seen an increasing awareness and concern for a range of problems which have to do with environment. All of us have experienced some form of environmental damage, such as pollution of air and water, congestion and erosion of our landscape, and the diminishing of wilderness regions. On the personal level, we may have been the victims of smarting eyes, smog-induced coughing, and a lack of elbowroom. A growing body of literature, including the president's State of the Union address this year, suggests that we may be troubled enough about our surroundings to talk about them, if not to do something about them.

The contribution of religion to this growing concern remains to be seen. The past contributions of the Judeo-Christian tradition to natural ecology are not auspicious. If religious institutions and religiously inspired individuals are to make any contribution to the shape of natural environment, they will have to act decisively in the years immediately ahead. Time is limited. But action is possible.

Ecological Neglect and the Judeo-Christian Tradition

Lynn White, jr., the historian and social critic, has suggested that man's view of his environment is conditioned to a great extent by his beliefs about his own nature and destiny. Christianity, White asserts, is a major culprit in today's ecological crisis. For Christian teaching has transmitted the idea that God created the earth for man's enjoyment and use.[1] At the same time, as White sees it, it has not developed guidelines for the responsible utilization of nature.

In the same critical vein, the ecologist and landscape architect Ian L. McHarg has argued that man has assumed that his dominion over nature is tantamount to the right of exploitation. It is his opinion that the creation story in Genesis, "in its insistence upon dominion and subjugation of nature, encourages the most exploitative and destructive instincts in man rather than those that are deferential and creative."[2] The result, as McHarg sees it, "is that man, exclusively, is thought [to

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be] divine—given dominion over all life, enjoined among all creatures to subdue the earth."[3]

These two opinions, scarcely complimentary to biblical religion, taken together constitute a challenge to Western man's traditional view of his environment. If McHarg is right, then the creation story in Genesis has done immense damage by forming an attitude toward nature which is essentially destructive. If White is correct, then Christianity in its later development has compounded the felony by insensitivity toward environment. Uncomfortably, there may be some measure of truth in such charges.

It is possible to take issue with McHarg's understanding of the first chapter of Genesis. In the main, he feels that the meaning of the text about creation is that it has made man his own demigod. Since the biblical account underlines his rule over nature, man assumes he can do what he wills with respect to nature; and the consequences are damaging. As McHarg states it:

> Show me a man-oriented society in which it is believed that reality exists only because man can perceive it, . . . that man exclusively is divine and given dominion over all things, indeed, that God is made in the image of man, and I will predict the nature of its cities and landscapes . . . the neon shill, the ticky-tacky houses, dysgenic city and mined landscapes.[4]

Whether or not McHarg's opinion is justifiable in relation to a critical appraisal of the creation story, it cannot be denied that Western man, profoundly influenced by some form of Christianity, *has* acted as if he has been given some right to utilize his environment in whatever way he pleases. And, further, there is a distinct absence in Christian theology of a serious consideration of the relation between man and his natural setting.

As a matter of fact, Christian thought has shown a marked tendency to deal with man at the expense of developing sensitivities toward nature. In short, theology in the West has focused on human nature and not on nature. Only recently, in response to obvious environmental problems, have a very few Christian moralists begun to correct this grave oversight. But such moves are at best embryonic. Clearly, if biblical religion is to have a place in the contemporary world, it must develop a theology of nature. Without it there is a question whether there can be any world at all in which theologians (or anyone else) can "do their thing."

At least two tasks are required. The first is a critical reappraisal of biblical thought about nature. The second is the explication of moral guidelines with respect to the current use of natural resources. Even if

the first task should prove less than satisfactory in the light of present-day problems, the second task cannot be avoided unless we choose to submit to the ever-increasing erosion of life itself.

Ecology in the Biblical Tradition

At the heart of the biblical issue is the interpretation of the story of creation in the first chapter of Genesis. Here the question is the meaning of man's putative dominion over nature. Recall what the text says:

> Then God said: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth." So God created man in his own image . . . male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth." And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food."[5]

In the biblical idiom, these are the events of the "sixth day" after which there followed a day of rest. The created system was then complete. From the recognition of the priority of light energy, created on the "first day," as it were, to the creation of man, animals, fish, insects, trees, plants, and the like on the "sixth day," the biblical writers perceived the development of the obvious elements of life and of life-support systems.

It is interesting and of incidental importance to note in passing the processes implicit in the creation on the "sixth day." In contemporary terms, the narrative suggests the development of oceanography ("dominion over the fish of the sea"), aeronautics ("over the birds of the air"), husbandry ("over the cattle"), geology and earth science ("over all the earth"), population control ("Be fruitful and multiply"), agronomy ("I have given you every plant yielding seed"). But the central significance of this creation account is not in any final sense man's potential technological skill so much as his earthly role. The fundamental purpose of the story is to point out that man is the agent for controlling nature. One may stand in wonder at the marvelous power of God in accomplishing the creation, of course. But from a more pragmatic viewpoint, the text underlines man's position in the created order. Man is given *dominion* over the rest of nature.

What are we to make of this position of dominion? The narrative is not completely clear at this point. It says that men have dominion, without specifying in practical terms what that involves. To be sure, we cannot expect direct contemporary assistance from an ancient Hebrew

scroll. For one thing, within the Hebrew language there was not the possibility for the kind of sophisticated formulation we might attempt today. Man's dominion over the earth was a simple given. The first biblical creation account does not consider the moral implications of man's dominion over nature. Thus, it could be argued that Ian McHarg's view that the concept of dominion in the creation narrative means exploitation in a destructive sense is an *ex post facto* judgment. McHarg has recognized, not only that men have been given dominion over nature as far as the biblical story is concerned, but also that men have destructively exploited nature through time as far as their activity is concerned. What McHarg seems not to have recognized is that exploitation need not be destructive. As a matter of fact, some Hebrew practice would suggest that the elements of nature were held in high esteem. For within the Torah, there is an incipient sensitivity toward conservancy. In the twentieth chapter of Deuteronomy, to cite just one case, the writer states that trees are not to be cut down but preserved as an essential element in the ecological system.[6]

The two sides of the question suggest some possibilities here. One, man is given dominion over nature. Two, man exploits his natural environment. Two could follow from one because either man in the biblical view was meant to exploit nature or man misconstrued or misused his dominion over nature.

By and large, neither question has been considered in biblical scholarship. Ordinarily, the commentaries have focused on man's role as ruler of nature or society and not on his responsibility toward the elements of nature. That is, few (if any) applications of the story have been made which readily assist one in developing a moral outlook on contemporary questions about nature or physical environment. For example, a major Protestant biblical commentary, *The Interpreter's Bible,* suggests that the concept of dominion is central to creation on the "sixth day." Then, however, it proceeds to illustrate man's dominion in terms of social history rather than environmental responsibility.[7] It would seem that the scholars have been more concerned with the politics of existence than with the perpetuation of nature.

There is one analysis of these crucial passages in Genesis, however, which is a welcome exception to the dominantly man-oriented interpretations one ordinarily finds. In the teachers' guide to an experimental curriculum developed by the Melton Research Center at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, the following question is raised in connection with the creation of man: "How is man to master and rule the earth?" The response to the question suggests that man "can understand the Creation in the sense of appreciating its beauty,

and he can know it in its moral dimension, that it is good."[8] The analysis continues:

> Because man can know the world he can *care for* it . . . in two senses. First, man must respect and cherish it as God's creation. . . . Second, man is to *care for* the world in the sense of *taking care of* it, preserving, conserving, maintaining the world.[9]

Such an interpretation of the creation story does not easily support the notion that man's dominion or rule over nature is synonymous with exploitation. Man is not, in this view, some demigod who can develop his natural surroundings in any way he pleases. Instead of being a divine agent over nature, man is seen as the agent for the divine in nature. All of his physical, mental, and moral endowments are to be utilized for the preservation, conservation, and maintenance of his environment.

Such a posture is not entirely at odds with other allusions to the relation between man and nature found elsewhere in the Bible. Consider quickly just two random cases. Psalm 104 is a poem to the grandeur of creation in which the writer develops the image that nature is but an extension of God himself. The totality of our environment is, so to speak, the clothing of God. Toward the end, the psalmist offers the following supplication for conservancy: "May the glory of the Lord endure for ever."[10] Or again, in the eighth chapter of Romans, Paul articulates a concept of the redemption of nature as well as the redemption of man. Although his focus is on man at the beginning of the chapter when he says, "There is . . . no condemnation of those who are in Christ Jesus," significantly Paul does not limit redemption to man. Redemption, in his view, extends throughout nature, including, as he puts it, "the creation itself."[11] While the concern of Paul was not singularly for the preservation or conservation of the natural world, neither is the maintenance of nature inimical to his theology. To be sure, it is generally agreed that Paul looked for a new kind of creation to be effected in a relatively short period of time. Still, the thrust of his theology indicates that in the new creation man would not be master of the domain but the servant.

Thus, a sense of concern for nature is not entirely missing from the biblical corpus. It can be shown that the view of a Christian apostle and Hebrew psalmist is not entirely man-centered. Indeed, in some degree the Bible is man-in-nature oriented! In addition, the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis is not to be taken in quite the simplistic terms that would imply that dominion necessarily meant destructive exploitation.

But on the basis of the narrative in Genesis 1, this argument is not without some ambiguity in our time. The pivotal words in the biblical text are "dominion" and "subdue." Man is given dominion over nature in the "sixth day"-creation account and he is told to "fill the earth and subdue it." The Hebrew words which are commonly translated as "dominion" and "subdue" carry potentially harsh connotations in our language. For example, the transliterated Hebrew we understand as dominion is *kābăs,* which can mean to "lord it over" someone, to be the master of someone inferior or to be a tyrant. Thus, man in exercising his dominion over nature might view his task as one of enslaving his environment, making it do what he and he alone wills for it. How else can one "lord it over" the created order? Before we jump to a conclusion here, however, it must be recognized that it is equally possible that one's dominion over nature could be accomplished benevolently or with deference.

The word for "subdue" presents similar possibilities. In transliterated form what we understand as subdue is *rādâ.* It means subjugate, capture, or conquer. But it is important to note that "subdue" in Hebrew need not be taken in a radically harsh way. Actually, when subjugation is meant to be harsh, the writers found it necessary to add the word "destroy" in the text to convey that connotation.[12] Still, the general implications of both words—dominion and subdue—are similar. In the context of the "sixth day"-creation account it may be said that man is to master nature and preserve that master-servant relation. Thus it might seem that man and nature could never live in reciprocal harmony, with man preserving nature and nature supporting man.

But the biblical case cannot rest there for at least two reasons. First, the primitive relation between man and nature was not actually one of master and servant. More nearly the situation was reversed. The early Hebraic peoples were no more successful in the conquest of nature than any others. They were the victims of climate and soil condition. Their migrations were stimulated by environmental factors as much as political condition. Their ultimate settlement in the heart of the fertile crescent was in large measure a decision based on their need to dwell in an environment where they could live in harmony with nature. The choice of the "promised land" was not grounded in the Hebrews' success in mastering or exploiting life-support systems.

The second piece of significant evidence is the second creation account in Genesis 2. Here the mood is different from the first chapter. The narrative is not one which focuses on the creation of natural orders and the injunction to rule, control, or master. Instead the picture is one of man (Adam) placed in a garden as a naturalist. His task is to pre-

serve it, not conquer it. Man is a dependent creature, a farmer or tiller. He is to live both as the servant of the Lord and as the preserver of his environment.

Over the course of this second creation story, two elements of human dependency are arresting. On the one hand, the story indicates that man is dependent from a psychosocial viewpoint. He needs a companion. By himself he is incomplete. Aloneness is neither tolerable nor the consummation of existence. Without losing his individuality, man is given another being who can help him achieve humanity. So, in the biblical image, with the woman (Eve) society is born.

On the other hand, what has not often been appreciated in biblical thought is that man's humanity is achieved within the framework of another dependency, namely, his dependency on nature. His task in the garden is not exploitation. As the tiller, man's proper function in Eden is to maintain what has been created. Although in some degree man is pictured as a creator with the power to choose between good and evil, nevertheless he is a creature who is part of and responsible to the rest of the created order.

The biblical analysis need not be labored further. One can find some justification for a position which would support the preservation of ecological balance. Man can be seen, in the creation narratives and in other places in biblical wisdom, as a creature who lives appropriately by giving deference to the life-support systems of nature. At the same time, one can find viewpoints that are potentially less deferential toward nature. Man can be seen in some biblical accounts as the ruler—indeed, the subjugator or the exploiter of his natural environment.

The conclusion we can reach at this juncture, then, is very largely a negative one. The fact that it is negative need not minimize its importance. In general, it can be said that the biblical perspective provides no clear warrant for an exploitative, man-centered theory of environment. If, as Ian McHarg charges, man has acted as if he had a God-given right to exploit nature in whatever way he chose, the full context of the Bible cannot be employed as his excuse. In short, significant sections of the biblical corpus present man with a contemporary decision. We can argue either that man has a right to rule nature or he has a responsibility to live in deference to it. But which? The Bible would seem to recognize that man has control of nature to a significant degree. (Has not that insight been substantiated through history?) Further, biblical thought would appear to sustain the view that man is a steward in the natural world. If he is a master, his mastery is limited.

What we shall do today with nature must be our own moral decision.

One can make his decision with respect to natural ecology using the Bible for insight, but not for excuse.

Ecology, Theology, and Ethics

So the task at hand is the development of a moral philosophy or, for some, a theology of nature that will be ecologically cogent. And the analysis to be made must be quite contemporary because Western man in his cultural development has been very largely unconcerned with nature per se.

A few years ago the title of a magazine article predicted: "The Human Race Has, Maybe, Thirty-five Years Left." The subtitle was even more grim. It stated: "After that people will start eating plankton. Or people."[13] That may occur by the year 2005. The implicit warning may quicken the conscience, but the alarmist tone could also be dismissed as deceptive exaggeration. My personal view is that we have been exposed to so many alarming problems in recent years that, as a people, we have become insulated from the rhetoric which would have us press the panic button the day after tomorrow.

More to the point, it can be said without exaggeration that it is virtually certain that within the next thirty-five years crucial environmental decisions will be made even if by default. But on what moral grounds can environmental decision-making proceed? My hypothesis is that we need to reconstruct both our view of nature and the reference of our theological categories in significant ways. Briefly, I would propose that we must recognize that the natural world is a closed, not an open system, and that traditional theological or moral ideas must be extended to include not only man and society but nature itself.

Lynn White has charged that in the past the major influence of Christian thought has been to legitimate indiscriminate and ultimately destructive natural development. Although hardly excusable, the indiscriminate use of nature in the past for man's immediate ends can be understood. In large measure, men in the past were not forced to consider the consequences of land use or the disposal of wastes because the ramifications of such acts were not readily apparent. One could settle in virgin territory and not seriously alter the balance of nature. Whole settlements, towns, and embryonic cities could be created in the wilderness, and there were still unfathomable amounts of frontier left. Nature, so it seemed, constituted a vast open system. There were more than enough natural resources to go around.

Accordingly, the more immediate task did not appear to be the preservation of life-support systems in nature. Man needed some viable polity for the preservation of social order. Theologically, he needed a

practical sense of human nature that could shape his social interaction. To a significant degree, the classical theological enterprise, stemming from the monumental work of Augustine, was devoted to such ends. Even in those instances where such theologies emphasized personal conversion and preparation for a hereafter, the analogies and metaphors employed had a human political ring to them. God was lord. Christ was king. In one case—by a liberal religious educator of the first half of this century, George Albert Coe—the traditional view of the kingdom of God was transmuted into a concept of the "democracy of God." However unique the construction, the polity of society was still the central theological model as well as the dominant concern.

The question now is whether a more basic model for theology and moral philosophy is the life-support systems of nature itself. That is, is ecology (not politics) the base from which to view the world? Here and there one finds a few useful probes in this direction.

It is a curious experience to read again a little volume which appeared about ten years ago, the title of which sounds immediately relevant to this topic. I refer to Joseph Sittler's *The Ecology of Faith.* In many respects, Sittler sensed the theological emphases which have dominated the latter half of the 1960s. Although the title of the book would indicate some little concern with nature, such is not the case. In that book, Sittler was more concerned with eschatology than ecology.

Actually, he uses ecology as a metaphor which can express or expose the relation between the word of God and "the web of historical circumstances."[14] Clearly, however, his employment of the word "ecology" removes it from the broad relationship between man and nature. Sittler was centrally concerned with the kind of historical-cultural questions which had been highlighted in such key works as H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture.* In Sittler's own phrase: "Culture is the name for that ecological matrix in which the embodied will and deed from above addresses the embodied bearer at every point along history's river."[15] With the advantage of time and the growing awareness of increasingly eroded landscapes, we can note the distance between "the embodied will and deed from above" and the practical activity of the real-estate developer. There is also an apparently significant disjunction between "history's river" and the polluted waterway which is the trademark of urban industrial society.

Sittler's work is not therefore directly useful in the development of a theology of nature. Further, his utilization of the ecology metaphor is limited to sociological concerns, the relation of man to man. That is, his analysis is related to social polity, as is the case with so many

of his theological predecessors. The ecological metaphor is not extended to the interface between man and his natural environment.

But, there are some provocative implications for a theology of nature in some of the systematic, doctrinal elements of Sittler's work. "There is a limit," he says, "which stands not only at the end of human life as death, but which is built into the structure of human life by virtue of its creaturely character."[16] He goes on:

> All birth and development, all unfolding and enterprise, and moral vision and achievement are not only enfolded within this limit but receive their urgent character from it. Here is a "given" time, a "given" space, a "given" possibility. Within the boundaries of this "given" there are, to be sure, vast and absolutely crucial possibilities for affirmation or denial, hearing or deafness, decision or stasis—but no elaboration of these possibilities can avoid the limit of sin and of death.[17]

If one can unfasten the sin-and-death language from circumstances of personal conversion, then the terms become distinctly relevant to man's environmental situation. From a moral perspective, boundless exploitation of nature can be construed as ecological sin. From a practical standpoint, the continuance of ecological sin will lead to literal death.

The striking feature of Sittler's theological viewpoint is the assumption upon which it rests. I have already noted that the exploitation of nature in the past can be understood in terms of the distance between act and consequence. The frontier seemed unlimited. Natural resources seemed inexhaustible. But that can no longer be blandly accepted as the case. Nature is not an open system. It is a closed system. To reiterate Sittler's phrase: "Here is a . . . 'given' space, a 'given' possibility . . . no elaboration of these possibilities can avoid the limit."

Accordingly, a theology for the future—a theology of hope, a theology of eschatological priority—must be a theology of nature. For a theology of nature is based on the balanced, interrelated, interdependent closed system of nature's life-support processes. Surely, a theology for the future cannot overlook such practical features of existence.

The theological implications of accepting nature as a closed instead of as an open system first pertain to the extent and reference of customary theological categories. We have used such terms as "sin and grace" and "judgment and salvation" to refer to men and/or societies. We have talked of one man sinning against another or against God. But we have not been sensitive to man sinning against nature itself. We have talked of judgment in individual and social terms but seldom if ever in naturalistic terms. Christians have preeminently centered their idea of grace in the person of Christ, his Incarnation and Atonement. Es-

pecially from an orthodox Protestant viewpoint, it is something less than acceptable to talk of nature as a sign of grace or to identify deference toward life-support systems as a mark of salvation.

Yet that is what a theology of nature must do. Without denigrating the objects of traditional theological speculation, it is possible to extend our categories beyond the relations between man and man or the relation between God and man to include the interrelation among nature, man, and God.

A second implication of seeing a correlation between a theology of polity and a theology of nature pertains to the boundaries of ethical formulation. In the main, the field of theological ethics has been concerned with determining an adequate posture in social relations. As a result, such issues as war and peace, social justice, and personal morality have been the subjects of ethical work. What is now apparent, however, is that nature itself is to be understood ethically. A concern for nature need not reduce the ethicist's treatment of social problems. In fact, to include nature and environment in the range of ethical concerns can actually sharpen the problems traditionally scrutinized. To cite one case, if one is to consider problems of war and peace, he may well need to analyze the nature of man and his various expressive needs, especially the drive for status and dominance over others which is an all too recognizable cause of warfare. Men do fight because of their desire to assume more power than they deserve or are capable of handling. In this sense, Cain and Abel are paradigmatic figures in man's perverse attempts to assume control over his neighbor. To inject problems associated with life-support systems into the field of ethics need not minimize awareness of such human sin. But men also fight for land because they are crowded and for food because they are hungry. It is even imaginable that they will fight for air when the supply is short or for water when purity is at a premium. Or they may, we can hope, plan their societies, not only in terms of the need to balance freedom and order, but also in terms of the balance between natural resources and natural scarcity.

A third implication of relating the concerns of nature to the attention of the moralist and theologian pertains to the responsibility of religious institutions and religiously sensitive individuals. The institutions of religion have ordinarily been involved in two fundamental activities: perserving a faith, and making it live in individual lives and corporate structures. A theology of nature would impel us to extend the concern for religious enlightenment and moral behavior to the very processes by which life continues. The virtues of charity and humility—however you care to phrase them for the contemporary mind—may still be eminently

practical values for living in the world. The world becomes increasingly smaller as population rises and as men traverse the globe in greater numbers and in less time. Unless we control ourselves in our use of nature and its resources, we may in time reduce our planet to a waste depot and a traffic jam. Such prospects are possible enough to inspire humility and mandate charity not only toward other men but also toward the basic stuff of life. Man can control himself to some extent. He can control and reshape nature to some extent. The lack of his own self-control underlines the practicality of relying on both the power of love from beyond and the developed rules for the maintenance of society. The extent to which we cannot control nature would similarly underline the necessity of living in deference to the forces of nature itself and of developing laws for natural maintenance or conservation.

Conclusion

What has been suggested here is twofold. First, I have proposed that a starting point in theological reflection and moral development is a recognition that our world is a closed, not an open system. We can no longer look for indeterminate possibilities either in human relations or in natural processes. Nature's interrelated, closed ecology constitutes the significant limits of human freedom. Second, in implementing this fundamental recognition about nature and life-support systems, I have proposed that the traditional political model of theology be changed to an ecological model. To speak of sin as if it referred to human association is incomplete. Man's violence toward his surroundings is just as sinful as his violence toward his fellows. To adapt a phrase from Reinhold Niebuhr, I would conclude that man's capacity for the control of nature makes a theology of nature possible; and man's inclination to destroy nature makes the development of a theology of nature a necessity.

NOTES

1. Lynn White, jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967):1203–7.
2. Ian L. McHarg, *Design with Nature* (Garden City, N.Y.: Natural History Press, 1969), p. 26.
3. Ibid., p. 44.
4. Ibid., p. 24.
5. Gen. 1:26–29 (Revised Standard Version).
6. Deut. 20:19.
7. See *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1952), 1:482 ff.
8. Leonard Gardner, *Genesis: The Teacher's Guide* (New York: Melton Research Center, n.d.), p. 74.
9. Ibid., pp. 74–75.

10. Ps. 104:31.
11. Rom. 8:1, 19, 21–22.
12. E.g., Deut. 9:3.
13. David Lyle, "The Human Race Has, Maybe, Thirty-five Years Left," *Esquire* (September 1967), pp. 116–18.
14. Joseph Sittler, *The Ecology of Faith* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), p. 5.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., p. 23.
17. Ibid.