

# TOWARD A NEW CHURCH LAND ETHIC

Edmund E. Brown\*

## INTRODUCTION

We live in a time of unprecedented change in the natural world. Ecologists tell us that we are currently experiencing the sixth mass extinction in the world's history, but with one key exception: the current crisis differs from the previous five in that it is human-induced. Acid rain, soil erosion, global warming, suburbanization, and over- or conspicuous consumption are just a few of the problems facing us at the turn of the millennium. It would not be difficult to add many other items to this list, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to address the actual manifestations of ecological degradation in any detail, or for that matter even attempt to evaluate the veracity of these facts. Rather, this paper is premised on the belief that while there may be some discrepancies, or even distortions, in the way scientific research is used and presented, mankind's current modus operandi is having a deleterious effect on the natural world. The earth's stocks of resources, natural capital (genetic, hydrologic, atmospheric), are being consumed or over-burdened faster than they can replenish.<sup>1</sup>

Faced with the huge, daunting ecological challenges our technological society has created, what is an appropriate Christian response? More specifically, do the Writings justify developing an intimate relationship with the land that supports us, such as "The Land Ethic," envisioned and so eloquently expressed by Aldo Leopold?

---

\* From catching butterflies as a child to learning about trees as an adult, Edmund Brown has had an interest in the natural world and its incredible diversity. He is a recent graduate of Bryn Athyn College (2005, B.A. in Biology), will be married in October, and is currently embarking on a career in nursing.

<sup>1</sup> Readers interested in further study of these trends can find a well-reasoned and researched presentation of statistics ranging from forestry to grain production in *The State of the World* reports published annually by the World Watch Institute.

## A LAND ETHIC

In recent decades society's interest in "the environment" has blossomed in response to mounting evidence of man's impact on the world. A person who early on sounded a call for a change in the practices of business as usual was a forester and ecologist from Wisconsin named Aldo Leopold. The final essay in his seminal collection, *A Sand County Almanac*, is titled "The Land Ethic." In it he spells out why we as a culture must develop an ethical system that respects the land. The idea of a land ethic has proven to be quite powerful, particularly among environmentalists, biologists, and increasingly, the public at large. Evidence of the growing awareness in academe and the larger world of the importance of Leopold's ideas can be seen in the greater and greater number of citations from *A Sand County Almanac* in scholarly works. (Leopold, *Bioscience*)

So what is the land ethic? First, his definition of "ethic."

An ethic, ecologically speaking, is a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence. An ethic philosophically is a differentiation of social from anti-social conduct. (Leopold 1949, 202)

Second, his definition of "land."

Land—this is not merely soil; it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and animals. (Ibid., 202)

From this it is obvious that he thought of "land" as much more than mere property and more than just dirt in which plants grow. His concept of land includes everything in the natural world—plants, animals, in short, all biota, as well as the cycles of water and nutrients that support them. His oft-quoted synthesis of these two ideas comes toward the end of the essay,

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise. (Leopold, 224)

Two modern philosophers, Callicott and Nash, have read all Leopold's papers and written about the experiences and beliefs that shaped his views. While Leopold was not antagonistic to Christianity—in *A Sand County Almanac* he refers to Ezekiel and Isaiah as individual thinkers who "asserted that despoilation of land is not only inexpedient but wrong" (1949, 212)—neither did he have patience with the attitude of dominion which was even more widely accepted by Western civilizations during the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, than it is today. Both Callicott and Nash point out that Leopold saw everything living, including man, to have intrinsic value. He saw intrinsic value in everything because all the parts added together made up the whole "earth organism," and that alone was enough reason to respect each plant and animal's right to live (Nash, 66). Interestingly, but not surprisingly, since he had a history as of hunting and game management, this belief in intrinsic value did not ever trickle down to the individual organism level. He was always more concerned with species and ecosystem integrity than with the rights or suffering of individual animals (Nash, 71). This attitude is a product of his study of ecology and the realization that elevating the rights of any one individual, or even group of individuals, is detrimental to the whole. The topic of intrinsic value is an important one and will be dealt with more fully later. But touching on intrinsic value does raise important questions. What are the norms by which a land ethic is evaluated? How important is ecology for developing those norms?

We must have a way to measure our impact on the land, to ascertain whether human disturbances are causal or merely correlative to an observed decline in "integrity, stability, and beauty" (Leopold, 1949). Caution must also be exercised in developing such an ethic, or else one easily slips into the naturalistic fallacy of believing that because ecosystems left relatively undisturbed by man are more diverse than drastically altered landscapes, they are somehow good. To do so is to impart a moral imperative of "ought" merely because of what "is." Just because a given ecosystem is diverse does not mean that it ought to be preserved as such. In addition, ecology has made great strides in the decades since *A Sand County Almanac* was first published, and our knowledge of stability, integrity, and diversity have grown, ushering in new understanding of those terms. For instance, for years it was assumed that stability in ecosystems

was roughly equivalent to diversity. The reasoning went this way: the very simple systems like cornfields are highly susceptible to insect attack and therefore unstable; a forest with a mix of species is not terribly affected if one species or another succumbs to a pathogen (for example, the American Chestnut in eastern North America), as other analogous organisms will roughly fill in the niche. There is some solid reasoning behind this rationale, but it fails to account for the stable ecosystems with very low diversity such as dunes on the barrier islands of eastern North America, and for stable, human altered ecosystems with low diversity such as the mountains in the Czech Republic burnt by acid rain (Gorke, 72). And of course the time frame that one uses to observe an ecosystem makes a huge difference in how evaluations are made. What might at first appear to be a devastating fire is in fact a needed part of an evolutionary cycle to which a forest is well adapted.

The point of these examples is not to discredit the statement about integrity, stability, and beauty. Rather it is to force an examination of the underlying values Leopold tried to convey in that simple sentence. We must heed the clarion call of ecologists to pay attention to the effects of our actions, individually and collectively, but at the same time we must not slip into dogmatic interpretations of their warnings. All science, including ecology, is human and prone to human errors and assumptions. We must act as well as possible with what we know.

On that note, what are the arguments used to support the development of a land ethic? As I read it there are three main schools of thought on the matter: Utilitarian, Holistic, and Theological, each with its own sub-groups. I will describe each philosophy and then try to demonstrate how the teachings of the New Church square with the other worldviews on this topic.

### **Instrumental**

Starting at the most external level is the economic set of arguments used to promote a land ethic. They are also called “instrumental arguments” because they value nature’s use to mankind as a source of products such as coal, wood, food—a source of all the basic necessities. Nature (land) is seen as having instrumental value to man as a means of meeting

his needs, both material and aesthetic. The instrumental arguments used suppose that human life is good and that future human life is desirable. Therefore it is wrong to imperil human life by irreparably damaging the natural world that supports it.

The philosopher Holmes Rolston points out that this is “an ethic that is secondarily ecological” (Rolston 1986, 13). He goes on to show that the laws of health are nonmoral, but we break them to our own detriment. Therefore most people impose an, “antecedent moral ought,” which in the case of health is “you ought not harm yourself.” By extension, then, you “ought to preserve human life” is the antecedent moral ought to the “moral imperative” of conservation and preservation of the land (Rolston 1986, 13–16).

Leopold used instrumental arguments to support his calls for greater intimacy in our relationship with the land. Perhaps it was a function of his time; perhaps he knew that very few people would be able, or willing, to follow his reasoning without the inclusion of economic reasons for acting “properly.” Indeed since the days of Marsh, Roosevelt, and Pinchot, the conservation movement has primarily restricted itself to utilitarian arguments even when the person’s real motives are deeper. Rachel Carson clearly had deeper reasons than the economic value of songbirds and the aesthetic value of raptors motivating her to write *A Silent Spring*, but the reasons she used to justify her proposal to ban chlorinated pesticides such as DDT were primarily utilitarian. The unknown consequences of losing a top predator such as a raptor could hypothetically be detrimental to human life. She also emphasized the loss of our “humanity” if these species were driven to extinction, or the way causing agonizing deaths in poisoned animals reduces our humanity (Nash, 80).

Nearly all writers on the topic of environmental ethics begin their essays by listing the horrendous statistics about the state of our world. The hope is that selfish desires to preserve our own lives can be put to use protecting the natural world. Along these lines some people propose letting the free market decide how to value the natural world. The argument is that if we are overdrawing our natural capital, all we need to do is structure the economy such that everything is given its appropriate value. There is a great need for thinking in this manner to be implemented. New York City’s purchase of development rights in the Catskill Mountains as

protection for its water supply is a very good example of this model in action. It cost less to preserve land in its present state than to build a costly and energy-intensive filtration plant. But as the basis of land protection, a purely economic approach fails, as Gorke demonstrates. He points out that a species of animal or plant must bear the burden of proof in a system operating on these principles. The only way it will be protected is if it can meet these three criteria:

1. utility must approximately be known;
2. it must be quantifiable;
3. after a cost-benefit analysis it must outweigh costs and other competing values (Gorke, 138).

The third point here is especially illuminating because it essentially says *there will be some species not worth saving*. The construction of the Tellico dam on the Tennessee River is a perfect example of this. A small endangered fish of no economic value; *Percina tanasi* lost its entire habitat to the creation of a reservoir behind this dam. A special exemption was made in the endangered species act to allow for the completion of the multimillion dollar dam. Eventually a “god squad” designed to assess the values of species preservation versus large development projects was allowed by the courts. When the dam was completed, the snail darter became the first species consciously and willingly exterminated for economic reasons (Freyfogle, 19–20). But acting thus is not in keeping with the spirit of the land ethic. Leopold made a similar point twenty-five years before the snail darter controversy when he wrote, “of the 22,000 higher plants and animals native to Wisconsin, it is doubtful whether more than 5 percent can be sold, fed, eaten, or otherwise put to economic use” (Leopold, 210).

A second utility argument that is very often made is ecological. Since the web of life is so complex, we must exercise great caution in removing any of the strands, or so the reasoning goes. We cannot know the effects of our actions in advance, so it is best to operate under the precautionary principle of “first do no harm.” Gorke shows this to be insufficient grounds for a land ethic by discussing the concept of a keystone species. The very concept of a keystone species points to the fact that some types of organisms are more important or vital than others. Removing one of the “others” therefore has little or no effect on the whole, and certainly doesn’t

affect ecological integrity to the point that human life might be jeopardized (Gorke, 148). Swallowtail butterflies are a good example of this. If all Swallowtail butterflies in North America went extinct, other insect pollinators would fill their niche. Hypothetically then, it would be possible for ecologists to identify keystone species, thereby freeing us to destroy all the others. Gorke also directs our attention to the fact that keystone species are probably not rare, and “ecology is far from being able to demonstrate we really *need* these (the non-keystone) species” (Gorke, 154).

Finally there are the aesthetic utility arguments. Nature is beautiful, and it must be preserved so that mankind has a place to go for reflection and recreation. In his essay on wilderness, Leopold waxes poetic about the value of wild places to the development of human psyche (Leopold, 192–194), and later in *The Land Ethic* he writes, “Turn him (modern man) loose for a day on the land and if the spot doesn’t happen to be a golf links or a ‘scenic spot’ he is bored stiff” (Leopold, 224). He also writes that education could ameliorate some of this problem, but not by itself since there are plenty of people with a Ph.D. in ecology who cannot “see” nature in the right way (Leopold, 174). The quotations above demonstrate the weaknesses of the aesthetic argument, for whose definition of beauty are we talking about? Some people might find the cultivated feel of a city park to be “beautiful” while others find it overdone and restricted. Some might find the deep woods of northern Minnesota to be “beautiful” while others might find them scary and disorienting. The typical aesthetic argument therefore plays up the scenic spots and totally ignores the fact that there are also *negative* aesthetic reactions to the natural world (Gorke, 167). To some, snakes, muck on the bottom of swamps, and coyotes howling nearby are profoundly disturbing experiences. Aesthetic arguments are simply too subjective to be the basis of an environmental ethic.

### Utilitarian

Utilitarian arguments for the development of environmental ethics make much of the statistics about the state of the world, but they take the moral sphere and extend it beyond anthropocentrism to all sentient creatures. Very simply put, utilitarianism equates happiness with goodness, but since happiness is so subjective and difficult to measure, its focus ends

up falling on the alleviation of suffering. Peter Singer is a modern ethicist who has written extensively on this world-view. His ethic extends to all sentient creatures; anything that increases happiness or pleasure is “right,” anything that causes suffering is “wrong.”

This is good as far as it goes. What sane or good person would actively desire another’s needless pain or suffering which is not for a greater good? Weaknesses in the utilitarian arguments become obvious when extended to the environment. Singer uses a wooded valley with hydropower potential as an example or case study of why ethics are important. Flooding the valley would cause the displacement and subsequent death, therefore suffering, of many sentient creatures. He does not address why the death and suffering imposed by a dam is worse than that imposed by mother nature as a rule of her regular workings. Also, using this logic, if over the long term it could be shown that a greater amount of “happiness” would result from construction than the “suffering” it would cause, then there would be a moral imperative to build the dam.

His other arguments are primarily anthropocentric, such as when he writes that some people find in wild places “the greatest feelings of aesthetic appreciation, rising to an almost spiritual intensity” (Singer, 272)—although he would never concede the existence of an actual spiritual life. So to take that opportunity for happiness away from those people, and future people, is wrong.

Utilitarians place great weight on the happiness of yet unborn sentient creatures, and Singer chides economists for their use of discounting, which assigns greater value to present happiness than it does to future happiness. He finds it particularly egregious when it is used to justify exploiting irreplaceable (at least in a human lifetime) natural resources like ancient forests and pristine rivers (Singer, 275–5). I, too, grapple with the issue of discounting in economics, as it is demonstrably responsible for some of our environmental woes, but the purely utilitarian logic breaks down under closer scrutiny. He argues that we should not recreate with fossil fuels because doing so impairs future generations’ ability to do likewise. But if using a jet ski makes me happy and harms no sentient creatures, why is it wrong for me to enjoy the rush it affords, even if doing so makes it impossible for a future person to experience the same thrill? It cannot be “right” for me to be an ascetic so that some one else can be a hedonist.

Utilitarianism is a branch of materialism, which attempts an end-run around the naturalistic fallacy by supplying an "ought" of happiness. Happiness is good, so one ought to support happiness. But it is virtually impossible to prove that soil erosion causes suffering. In the long run it will make the world less able to support life, but even with a very loose definition of suffering, reduced carrying capacity cannot qualify.

### **Intrinsic Value**

Now we come to the topic of intrinsic value. It is here that the land ethic truly makes its case. Intrinsic value arguments are made under many different names and assumptions, from the deterministic "biophilia" of E.O. Wilson, to Naess's "deep ecology," and to Callicott and Gorke's "holism." The common ground they share is the belief that humankind is a small part of a larger world, a dispensable part, and that life would go on with out humans around. The first of eight points to the deep ecology platform is that,

The flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth has intrinsic value. The value of non-human life forms is independent of the usefulness these may have for narrow human purposes. (Arne Naess, p. 29)

In developing the idea of a land ethic, Leopold had much more than the mere economic value of nature to humans in mind. He used instrumental arguments since they are generally common ground for all people. He used an economic rationale to support the stances he took, but more often than not he writes of the sacrifices required to truly have a land ethic, and the main thrust of his essays is for the development of a relationship with the land, a valuing of it for what it is, not simply for what it can provide. He writes that, "It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land, and a high regard for its value. By value I of course mean something far broader than mere economic value; I mean value in the philosophical sense" (Leopold, 223). "We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in" (Leopold, 214). Clearly Leopold thought that the land ethic must grow out of a 'love' for the natural world.

Here it also becomes apparent that Leopold was first an ecologist and second (or later) a philosopher. Callicott has devoted much of his career to giving the land ethic first proposed by Leopold a voice in philosophical academia. He claims that much of modern academia's trouble grasping the land ethic stems comes from three fundamental stumbling blocks. "(1) Leopold's extremely dense prose style in which an entire conceptual complex may be conveyed in a few sentences, or even a phrase or two; (2) his departure from the assumptions and paradigms of contemporary philosophical ethics; and (3) the unsettling practical implications to which the ethic leads" (Callicott 1989, 76). In a less relaxed tone (but more true) he writes, "Leopold I should hasten to point out, was no better a student of philosophy than most professional philosophers are of conservation and its concerns. Hence his characterization of an ethic, 'philosophically,' is, put most charitably, incomplete" (Callicott 1999, 60).

Callicott unpacks the concepts crammed into the land ethic and gives them voice. The conclusion he draws is that the land ethic is in essence a Humean-Darwinian-Leopoldian worldview (Callicott 1999, 101). By Humean he means that it is first and foremost emotive, by Darwinian and Leopoldian that it also has grounding in scientific observation of the world. The usual charge leveled at Humean philosophies is that they are subjective; what is good to one person is not necessarily good to another. I might find a coyote howling nearby to be an exciting and wonderful experience, but city-dweller might be disturbed and scared by the same noise and wish never to hear it again. Put another way, the philosophy lacks a normative force, or if it is allowed that there is force, then it must be purely deterministic, that our genes solely determine moral sentiments in favor of an environmental ethic. If this were true, the only way to develop a land ethic would be to breed it into the human race. Also, following a deterministic line of thinking, if the current sentiments in society hold that environmental values are of little importance, then there is no way that can be wrong. Even if a change in genes did take place such that a strong land ethic arose, it would not be better, just different (Callicott 1999, 109). The concept of 'biophilia' proposed by the noted entomologist E.O. Wilson is deterministic, although he argues that the love of life is already in everyone's genes, but it needs the proper environment in order to develop.

Callicott does not go the way of Wilson and argue in favor of radical determinism. Rather he ends up on the side of what I call a “gentle determinism.” He writes that we are indeed shaped by our genes in as much as they instill in us a desire to participate in culture. But culture is mutable, based on understood truths, and can change rapidly when faced with new truths or facts (Callicott 1999, 114). This in turn can quickly cause a change in the *modus operandi* of the individuals that compose it.

Another issue critics of the land ethic raise, assuming they buy the reasoning given thus far in support of it, is the possibility of ecofascism. If all life is valuable, and the six billion humans on the planet threaten the “integrity, stability, and beauty” of the biosphere, then does the land ethic demand a culling of the human population to a more sustainable level? It most certainly advocates such actions in the case of rabbits and deer when their populations grow too large. Gorke’s model of duty levels is illuminating on this topic (see Figure 1):

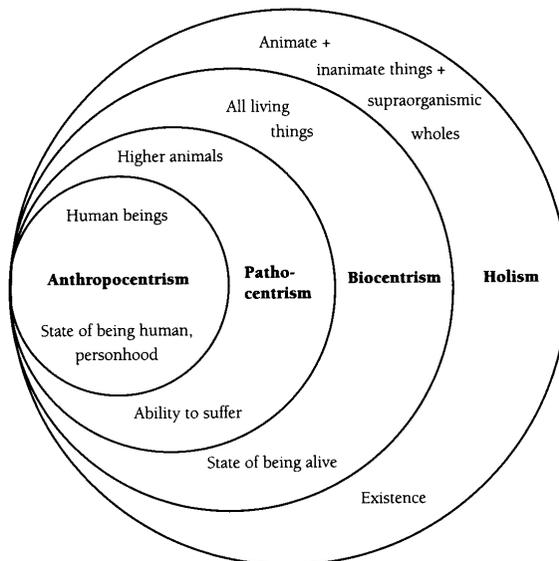


Figure 1. “Basic types of environmental ethics and the limits of direct human responsibility they encompass. In the upper part of the drawing the natural objects are listed to which intrinsic value is accorded. The lower section indicates the criteria that are decisive for moral consideration.” Figure 2 in Gorke (2003, 123). From *The Death of our Planet’s Species* by Martin Gorke. Copyright © 2003 Klett-Cotta and the author. Reproduced by permission of Island Press, Washington D.C.

It is worth noting that Gorke is not directly addressing the ecofascism charge with this diagram, but it is useful in helping to conceptualize the defense. The duties must extend in circles as in the diagram, beginning with those to other people, then to animals, then plants, and finally the natural world. The land ethic is not meant to shoulder all other ethical reasoning out of the way; taken too far it could easily be misanthropic, or even murderous. Leopold saw it as a step in the direction of an expanding moral sphere, an augmentation of existing systems (with some radical ramifications), but it should not be used to justify any abridgement of interpersonal ethical conduct (Callicott 1999, 71).

How does one develop a value system that includes the natural world without going down the road to ecofascism? The philosopher Holmes Rolston III has written fairly extensively on values for and in the natural world. He writes, "Values appear only in the human response to the world. To ask about values in nature is, then, to form a misleading question, for values are only in people, created by their decisions" (Rolston 1986, 74). He addresses the idea of levels of value, which is connected to the topic from the previous paragraph, and then goes on to ". . . examine the kinds of value that arise *in association with* nature, being founded on physical and biological properties there . . ." (Rolston 1986, 75). He claims that the creation of value is not a one-way street. Things are valued by humans for what they are but also for *where* they are (both the human subject and the valued object). According to Rolston, "Value attaches to a nonsubjective form of life, but is nevertheless owned by a biological individual, a thing in itself. These things count, whether or not there is anybody there to do the counting. . . . They do their own thing, which we enjoy being let in on, and which we care to see continue when we pass on" (Rolston 1986, 111). He, like the other philosophers who write in favor of environmental ethics, tries to develop an objective or normative basis for the more subjective act of valuing. The point here is that we can value our relationships with people, and we can value the natural world. Creating a value system that includes the natural world need not demote humans to an equivalent place with sparrows.

I find most of the ideas generated by ethicists when they argue for environmental ethics to have merit to them. Where I depart from Leopold, Callicott, and Gorke, is when they argue from an evolutionary perspective

that because humankind is a part of a larger greater world, a great sea of life, we are obligated to preserve and protect it. Leopold says, "In the beginning, the pyramid of life was low and squat; the food chains short and simple. Evolution has added layer after layer, link after link. Man is one of thousands of accretions to the height and complexity of the pyramid" (Leopold, 215–216). In giving more precise voice to the land ethic Callicott writes, "Evolutionary theory provides the conceptual link between ethics and social organization and development. It provides a sense of 'kinship with fellow-creatures' as well, 'fellow-voyagers' with us in the 'odyssey of evolution'" (Callicott 1989, 82). And Gorke writes, "Either one essentially rejects the religious, teleological, and epistemological premises concerning the world and the role of humankind outlined above; then one can hardly continue to uphold an anthropocentric worldview. Or one feels compelled to adhere to this worldview because one still finds a large number of these premises accurate" (Gorke, 248). He uses evolutionary biology to support his case for the rationality of rejecting the anthropocentric worldview. I do not see how a belief that one is part of a larger natural community would compel action to protect it. People see themselves as part of a larger *human* community and that belief certainly does not compel everyone to act in the best interests of the community. If it did, there would be no stealing, no corruption, and no exploitation of the poor or disenfranchised. I absolutely agree with the proposition that we need to cultivate more intimate relationships with the natural world, and to limit the effects of our actions on it, but I strongly disagree that the reason we should do so is because we are "a part of nature."

### **Theological**

There are three broad interpretations of the Bible in regard to people's relation to nature accepted in Christian circles these days—dominion, stewardship, and citizenship ethics. The dominion ethic holds that people were created in the image of God and granted mastery over nature to do with as we please; negative side-effects on exploited ecosystems are of no importance because only heaven matters. The stewardship ethic reads the Bible differently. It finds support for a belief that man is the reason for creation, but that we must keep the world that we have been entrusted

with a beautiful life-supporting gem, which we should use but not exploit. Lastly there is the citizen ethic that claims we are merely citizens in a natural world. All of God's creation is of equal value in His eyes. There is a gradation of dualism of spirit and body from rigorously dualistic in the dominion ethic to almost non-dualistic in the citizen ethic.

The dualistic attitude toward nature presented in Genesis is often blamed for many of our environmental problems. If we are to have dominion over the world and subdue it, then we will do with it as we please, and the Hebrew word translated as 'subdue' has a harsh militaristic sense to it. Reading that passage literally we were enjoined by God *to wage war* on the surrounding environment, to wrest a living from it (Black, 37). This is the *Dominion* worldview that Lynn White Jr. attacked rather vigorously.

In 1967 a historian named Lynn White Jr. laid the blame for the world's "ecological crisis" squarely at the doorstep of Christianity. He accused the dualism of man/nature and dominion of being the driving force behind the exploitation and overdraw of the world's resource stocks. He claimed that science is an extension of natural theology and that ". . . modern technology is at least partly to be explained as an Occidental, voluntarist realization of the Christian dogma of man's transcendence of, and rightful mastery over, nature. But as we now recognize, somewhat over a century ago science and technology—hitherto quite separate activities—joined to give mankind powers which, to judge by many of the ecological effects, are out of control. If so, Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt" (White, 1206). This statement, published in a prestigious scientific journal aroused the ire of theologians, but it also stimulated a discussion on the complicity of the organized church in ecological ruination. Since the publication of his article, much progress has been made in biblical interpretations that afford respect to creation.

I think where White oversteps his bounds is when he links Christianity with technological optimism and calls it the root of the problem. If he had said Christian dualism is partly guilty he would be on firmer ground. If the determining criterion of the ecological crisis we now find ourselves in is the attitude of dominion inherent in Christianity, then there should be examples of other large religious cultures that lived in harmony with their environments (Wright, 218). A dualistic attitude contributes to an ethic that discounts the value of all things natural, but it does not in itself

require that contempt be felt for creation. Gorke, who is decidedly not a Christian philosopher, says this as well, "The claim to fundamental power over all the nonhuman world expressed in this statement (referring to the Second Vatican Council's pronouncement that all earth should be oriented toward humans) was, of course, not restricted to either Christianity or the other great monotheistic religions Judaism or Islam" (Gorke, 246).

However, White does partially redeem himself in the last paragraph of his paper when he writes, "Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. We must rethink and refeel our nature and our destiny." I agree with most of that statement except for the part about the problems being caused *by* religion. I side with Richard Wright when he says that the fundamental problems are, ". . . *human greed, pride, carelessness, and ignorance*. This is the source, the root of our environmental troubles" (italics his) (Wright, 219). So it is not that Christianity caused our environmental problems. It just happens it was fertile ground for the development of powerful technologies, which, when used selfishly or sinfully, cause great harm to the world.

It is interesting that in some Christian circles, notably the evangelical ones, the doctrine of dominion is held in high regard, but the verses immediately preceding them are therefore partially ignored. After each act of creation God sees that what he had just made, "was good." This phrase is used six times during the creation story, and a seventh time with the adjective "very" in the last verse describing the whole work (Genesis 1:1-31). If God finds something to be "good," and, read literally, all creation is good in the eyes of God, then humans cannot claim any right to destroy it.

After the publication of Lynn White's paper, a new school of Christian thought developed in a virtual tidal wave of apologetics (Callicott 1999, 187). It gained a substantial following in the 1960s and '70s as the gravity of our ecological crisis began to sink in. Theologians hurried to defend their faith from the indictments made by the likes of White, and to develop a reading of the Bible that was in keeping with observable facts in the natural world. The result was the Stewardship ethic. This ethic holds that man is made in God's image, but that does not mean we should try to act as God, deciding what is allowed to live and what is not. We are to keep creation, to use it,

but not to use it up. The parable of the vinedresser is one of many biblical quotations used to support this line of reasoning (Matt 21, Mark 12, and Luke 20).

Another quotation that supports this interpretation of the Bible comes from Matthew where Jesus says, “Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father’s will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows” (Matt. 10:29–31). Two conclusions can easily be reached by examining these verses. There is a hierarchy in the natural world with man at its pinnacle, *and* God watches out even for the sparrows.

In his short work, *Thou Shalt Die in a Polluted Land*, the Reverend Paul Folsom gives one of the most succinct summaries of why the stewardship ethic has been accepted so quickly in Christian theology. He makes explicit the connection between acting well toward the neighbor and acting well toward the land. “Jesus Christ made loving of the neighbor the first concern of the Christian ethic. This neighbor is more and more seen to everyone on the globe. The teaching of Christ’s commandment of love will not be complete without due consideration to the care of the earth from which all men draw their nourishment and sustain their life” (Folsom, 55).

The stewardship ethic, then, does not fully depart from the anthropocentrism, which is ingrained in thinking this way. It argues that the world must be loved for what it is, God’s great creation, and for what it does, support human life. Therefore in a few direct logical steps, developing a land ethic supports an anthropocentric ethic. Peter Wenz defines the stewardship ethic thus, “God created the world for the good of people and all other creatures. People should flourish as they care for creation. *Human domination of nature is meant to be for the good of the whole, not for anthropocentric mastery*” (Wenz, 228; *Italics his*).

The third interpretation of the Bible is the citizen ethic. It is only a short step away from the “holism” of Callicott and Gorke. And one of its chief proponents interestingly enough is Callicott, despite the fact that he is not a Christian. This makes his writings somewhat suspect, but it is still worth examining. The citizen ethic sees the fall of man as the development of anthropocentrism. John Muir is this interpretation’s poster child. In his

essay Callicott uses John Muir as an example of a “citizen of nature,” because he was schooled extensively in the Bible and made references to it in his writings throughout his life. However I do not know that he was a “Christian” at the time of his death.

It can be argued that Saint Francis, who saw all God’s creation giving praise to the Lord in heaven and who gave sermons to the birds and beasts, is another great example of the citizenship interpretation. “The greatest spiritual revolutionary in Western history, Saint Francis, proposed what he thought was an alternative Christian view of nature and man’s relation to it; he tried to substitute the idea of equality of all creatures, including man, for the idea of man’s limitless rule of creation. He failed” (White, 1203–1207). But there is still a belief that what is needed is just such an ethic to flourish. “The profoundly religious, but heretical sense of the primitive Franciscans for the spiritual autonomy of all parts of nature may point a direction” (White, *ibid.*). It could be that the non-Christian proponents of the citizenship ethic think that ‘stewardship’ is not radical enough to really change our relationship with the land. Wenz unmasks just such a bias when he introduces the citizenship ethic section of his book. “The Stewardship Interpretation may not be the environmental ethic needed today. Yet, it seems clearly superior to the Master [Dominion] Interpretation” (Wenz, 230).

### The New Church

Is a land ethic compatible with New Church doctrine? The short answer is “yes,” but the reasons for acting, the motives one brings into play, must be different from those proposed by Leopold. Where Leopold saw humans as a product of evolution, we should see God’s providence. Leopold would have us love nature because we are a part of it, but as I read the Writings we should love nature *for its uses* and for the fact that God created it.

Swedenborg writes that nature does not exist in its own right. “All this shows how sensually people are thinking when they say that nature exists in its own right, how reliant they are on their physical senses and their darkness in matters of the spirit” (DLW 46). The gentle determinism and

view of man as ‘merely’ a citizen in a much bigger world is incompatible with the Writings of the New Church. Two numbers make this point quite clear:

Indeed, all things are for the sake of the human race, so an angelic heaven can come from it. Through the human race creation returns to the Creator it came from. This joins the created universe with its Creator, and through the conjunction there is eternal continuation. (ML 85)

The useful functions of everything created tend upward, step by step, from the lowest, to us, and through us to God the Creator, their source . . . these “lowest things” are all the elements of the mineral kingdom . . . The intermediate things are all the elements of the plant kingdom . . . The primary things are all the members of the animal kingdom . . . The lowest are for the service of the intermediate and the intermediate for the service of the highest. So the useful functions of all created things tend upwards in a sequence from the lowest to the human, which is primary in the divine design. (DLW 65)

If mankind is at the top of the pyramid in the natural world, it may then appear that a dominion interpretation is justified, but this is simply not the case. “Can anyone fail to see quite clearly that the goals of creation are useful functions? Simply bear in mind that nothing can arise from God the Creator—nothing can be created, therefore—that is not useful” (DLW, 308). *Everything* has a use. Too often our definition of “useful” includes only what is economically expedient or imparts some direct, observable benefit to a person. There are many organisms in the world that do not fit this description (remember Leopold’s less than 5% of the 22,000 higher organisms . . .), but they *are still useful*. Swedenborg states this explicitly a few numbers later after discussing the forms of life that are directly useful to humans for food, shelter, clothing, et cetera. He writes:

There are of course many things that we do not find useful, but these extras do not prevent usefulness. In fact they enable useful functions to continue. Then there are abuses of functions; but again, the abuse of a function does not eliminate the useful function, just as the falsification of

something true does not destroy the truth except for people who are doing the falsifying. (DLW 331)

On first reading this seems to contradict what modern ecology tells us about the web of life. Earlier in this paper I described how removing some life forms from the “web,” would have little effect on the earth’s ability to support basic human life. Obviously if any human-induced extinction caused irreparable damage to the natural world, we would already have perished, but this redundancy and forgivingness can also disguise the fact that all forms are still useful. Just because the form is not essential to the continued existence of humans does not mean that a species did not perform a use. Adaptive radiation seems to demonstrate this point. Wolves were extirpated from the eastern United States hundreds of years ago, but over the last few decades coyotes have moved into much of the wolves former range. The coyotes of Eastern North America have taken over much of the niche once filled by wolves; they hunt and live in packs and the average body weight of an adult is nearly twice that of their “original” ancestors in Southwestern North America. In these rapid changes of a species’ habits I see God raising up a new form to perform the use of “top predator.”<sup>2</sup>

The Writings also tell us that loving the common good is appropriate and desirable. In describing people who do good, we read in *Arcana Coelestia*: “They call the common good itself their neighbor to a higher degree, for within this neighbor the good of a greater number of persons is seen” (AC 2425.3). This sounds quite similar to the reasons other Christian use to support the stewardship ethic.

Yet another point in the Writings about how we should regard the natural world is in the discussion of the fourth commandment. Swedenborg writes that the Lord created the sun to be like a father and the earth like a mother, “from whose marriage spring all the products of germination which adorn the earth’s surface. . . . All of these occurrences are evidence

---

<sup>2</sup>I realize that Swedenborg writes about correspondences and some animals (often the top predators) have negative correspondences. I do not believe that God creates the evil correspondence, rather that He allows it since it is there. In view of the demonstrable importance predators are to functional ecosystems, it seems that we must protect them. Perhaps they are needed reminders of the existence of evil.

that the Lord by means of the sun and the earth in the natural world, provides all necessities for living creatures and for inanimate matter” (TCR 308). So in the most external sense we can regard the sun and earth as our natural father and mother (although the Writings do not say this explicitly with respect to humans), and therefore should afford them due respect.

I think from this, and other numbers, that it is apparent that the Writings most closely support a stewardship interpretation of the land ethic. Nowhere do the Writings give us permission to exercise mastery over nature or to claim that we can decide which forms should live and which should die, which forms of love are worthwhile and which are not. To make such sweeping judgments is to succumb to the love of dominion and place our judgment over God’s.

In conclusion, the ecological crisis we are currently experiencing is not solely an external problem. We must develop an ethic that includes our relationship to the land that supports us, but base it on religious principles. Only an ethic with a foundation in the Divine law will be strong enough to overcome the selfishness and arrogance that drives us in our attempts to control nature. The last word goes to the Christian author, essayist, farmer, and poet Wendell Berry, who says of reading the Bible with the land in mind, “We will discover that for these reasons our destruction of nature is not just bad stewardship, or stupid economics, or betrayal of family responsibility; it is the most horrid blasphemy. It is flinging God’s gifts into His face, as if they were of no worth beyond that assigned to them by our destruction of them” (Berry, 98).

*The Earth is the Lord’s, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein. (Psalm 24:1)*

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Berry, Wendell. *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community*. New York: Pantheon Books, a Division of Random House, 1993.
- Black, John. *The Dominion of Man*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1970.
- Carl, A. Leopold, “Living with the Land Ethic.” *Bioscience* vol. 54, no. 2 (February, 2004): 149–154.

## TOWARD A NEW CHURCH LAND ETHIC

- Callicott, J. Baird. *Beyond the Land Ethic*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *In Defense of the Land Ethic*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1989.
- Folsom, Rev. Paul. *And Thou Shalt Die in a Polluted Land*. Ligouri, Missouri: Liguorian Pamphlets and Books, 1971.
- Freyfogle, Eric T. *Bounded People, Boundless Lands*. Washington DC: Island Press, 1998.
- The Holy Bible*, trans. unknown. New King James Version. New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984.
- Gorke, Martin. *The Death of Our Planet's Species: A Challenge to Ecology and Ethics*. Washington DC: Island Press, 2003.
- Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1949.
- Naess, Arne. *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Nash, Roderick F. *The Rights of Nature*. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, Ltd., 1989.
- Rolston III, Holmes. *Environmental Ethics*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 1988.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Philosophy Gone Wild*. Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1986.
- Singer, Peter. *Practical Ethics*, second edition. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Arcana Coelestia, Vol. I*: Trans. John Elliot. London: The Swedenborg Society, 1983.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Arcana Coelestia, Vol. III*: Trans. John Elliot. London: The Swedenborg Society, 1985.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Divine Love and Wisdom*, Trans. George Dole. West Chester, Pennsylvania: The Swedenborg Foundation, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Love in Marriage*. Trans. David F. Gladish. New York: The Swedenborg Foundation, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Heaven and Hell*. Trans. Unknown. 1958; reprint. London: The Swedenborg Society, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The True Christian Religion. Vol. I*: Trans. John Chadwick. London: The Swedenborg Society, 1988.
- Wenz, Peter S. *Environmental Ethics Today*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- White, Lynn. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis." *Science* 155 (1967): 1203–1207.
- Wright, Richard T. *Biology Through the Eyes of Faith*. Revised. San Francisco, California: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I want to express appreciation to the Reverend Grant Odhner for drawing my attention to key ideas on Nature from the Heavenly Doctrines.

## POSTSCRIPT

1. While reading one of Callicott's essays I had an insight about the value of the Writings. He was defending the Humean aspects of a land ethic from Kantian philosophers attacking it as having no "normative basis." The crux of the debate seemed to be love versus wisdom. Does one love something or does one rationally decide what is proper? Thanks to the Writings I can say it is not an either/or debate; it is a both/and situation. Love directs our desires, but it must be tempered by judgment. The people who call for everything to be valued for its intrinsic worth are on the right track because we are supposed to love, but we cannot love indiscriminately. The truths in the Word provide direction, and a *reason* to love; this is then supported by scientific observations of ecology, which can direct our day-to-day actions properly.

2. Second, I think it could be reasonably argued that the Writings support an ethic that verges on the citizenship interpretation of the Bible (*TCR* 46 and *DLW* 56). But they could also be used to support an attitude that leans toward dominion, simply by trumping up the value of being at the "top of the pyramid." But I think the surest ground lies in the stewardship interpretation, where there is an acknowledgment of the special place human beings fill in the spiritual world-natural world conjunction, using that truth as justification for great responsibility, not a right to exploit. □