

CREATIONISM AND OUR ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

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The author examines the criticisms which have been raised against a literal understanding of Genesis in connection with the present environmental crisis. He points out that evolutionism is more likely to lead to exploitation than creationism. He pleads for a return to a creationist understanding of the relationship of man to nature.

Ecology and the environment are much in the news today. Not a day goes by without some mention of pollution in our daily newspapers; magazines of general circulation now have entire departments devoted to the environment. To be against pollution and to be for clean air and water are the "in" things.

There is no doubt that we face some very real problems as a result of our deteriorating environment. We may debate whether the term "crisis" is justified; yet it is obvious that we face some serious problems as a result of what we have done to the world about us. Morris Neiburger, the Los Angeles meteorologist, is wrong when he pessimistically suggests that all civilization may pass away, not from a sudden cataclysm like a nuclear war, but from gradual suffocation from human waste, for Peter tells us differently (II Peter 3:10). Yet most people agree that

man has been wasteful of the resources of the world in which he lives. He has ravaged its forests and soils and has plundered its mineral wealth; he has squandered and soiled its waters; he has contaminated its air. No reasonable person would suggest that man not use his environment, or that he revert to his primitive past, but no reasonable person can condone his wasteful excesses.¹

It is hardly necessary to outline the environmental problem. Anyone who reads or watches television or listens to the radio is well aware of the seriousness of the situation. Who is to blame? It is easy to point the finger at soulless corporations, greedy businessmen, vote-hungry politicians, apathetic voters, money-hungry developers, but the fact of the matter is that we have all contributed to the deterioration of the environment. To quote Pogo, "We have met the enemy and he is us."

Why Does Man Exploit?

But why? What has led people to exploit the environment, waste our resources, and cheat future generations of their legacy? There are a great many people who blame the Bible and

specifically the Christian church for our present crisis. For example, Lynn White, Jr., in a widely quoted article places the blame squarely on the shoulders of the Christian church. Christianity, he says, is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen.

Christianity in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except perhaps for Zoroastrianism) not only established a dualism of man and nature, but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends. . . . By destroying pagan animism Christianity made it possible to exploit nature with a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects. . . . Somewhat over a century ago science and technology joined to give man powers which, to judge by many of the ecological effects, are out of control. If so, Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt. . . . We shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence except to serve man.²

And Ian L. McHarg in his otherwise very excellent book, *Design With Nature*, says much the same thing:

Whatever the earliest roots of the western attitude toward nature, it is clear that they were confirmed in Judaism. The emergence of monotheism has as its corollary the rejection of nature; the affirmation of Jehovah, the God in whose image man was made, was also a declaration of war on nature. The great western religions born of monotheism have been the major source of our moral attitudes. It is from them that we have developed the preoccupation with the uniqueness of man, with justice and compassion. On the subject of man-nature, however, the Biblical creation story of the first chapter of Genesis, the source of the most generally accepted description of man's role and powers, not only fails to correspond to reality as we observe it, but in its insistence upon dominion and subjugation of nature, encourages the most exploitive and destructive instincts in man rather than those that are deferential and creative. Indeed, if one seeks license for those who would increase radioactivity, create canals and harbors with atomic bombs, employ poisons without con-

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straint, or give consent to the bulldozer mentality, there could be no better injunction than this text. Here can be found the sanction and injunction to conquer nature—the enemy, the threat to Jehovah.

The creation story in Judaism was absorbed unchanged into Christianity. It emphasized the exclusive divinity of man, his God-given dominion over all things, and licensed to subdue the earth. . . . When this is understood, the conquest, the depredations, and despoliations are comprehensible, as is the imperfect values system.³

So we creationists are said to bear an even greater burden than we have generally recognized. Apparently, according to some, we have been guilty not only of anti-intellectualism and anti-science by supporting the Genesis account of creation against the “findings” of modern scientists, but also we have encouraged exploitation of nature and have brought about the modern environmental crisis by insisting on accepting the Genesis account as literal and historical!

White and McHarg are probably correct in blaming our environmental crisis on exploitation. They may be right even in faulting Christians for exploiting, though Christians are certainly no more guilty than those who do not share their faith. We would even be willing to grant that some people have used God's statement to the “Father of us all” that he was to “rule over the earth and subdue it” as a justification for an exploitation of the resources which God provided.

Mankind Has Always Exploited

But both are wrong in making Christianity solely responsible for man's exploitation of his environment. White admits as much when he cites as examples of man's exploitation the human control of the Nile for six millennia, the fire-drive method of hunting which he believes was practiced by primitive man, and the cutting of forests by Romans to build ships to fight the Carthaginians. These certainly cannot be attributed to acceptance of Genesis.

It is evident, too, that Christianity can hardly be blamed for the damage man did to the fertile crescent, the cradle of civilization. The Tigris and Euphrates have their origins in the hills of Armenia which were originally forested. The rich alluvial plains of these two rivers nourished a flourishing civilization until Assyrian and Babylonian militarism required the cutting of the forests. The fertile soils soon washed away and were deposited in the Persian Gulf so that Ur of the Chaldees, once a seaport, is now 150 miles from the sea and its buildings are buried under 35 feet of silt.

Christianity can hardly be blamed for what has happened to the once fertile valley of the

Indus River, or the fertile Chinese countryside whose Yellow River gets its modern name from the silt which it carries. The exploitation of this country's resources is well documented in a recent article by Yi-Fu Tuan.⁴

He points out that the concern leading to the tradition of forest care in China arose in response to damages that had occurred already in antiquity. He also calls attention to the destruction of forests and consequent soil erosion which came from the expansion of cities, from the indiscriminate burning of woodlands to deprive dangerous animals of their hiding places, and even from the need for soot to make ink. Further Yi-Fu Tuan states that while Buddhism suggested the preservation of trees around temple compounds, it also introduced the idea of cremation which brought about timber shortages in the southeastern coastal provinces of China. He calls attention to overgrazing in Mongolia where the most abused land appears as sterile rings around the lamaseries; and he quotes a Japanese conservationist who blames most of the deforestation of his country on Buddhism which fostered the building of huge halls and temples.

It is Tuan's thesis that a wide gap may exist between a culture's ideals and their expression in the real world. He believes that there are conflicts between an ideal of nature or environment and our practice.

A similar point of view is expressed by Moncrief.⁵ He believes that the wide acceptance of White's “simplistic” explanation is based more on fad than on fact and states that to contend that religious tradition is responsible for our ecological crisis “is a bold affirmation for which there is little historical or scientific support.” He believes that various cultural and historical facts, such as the American development of a society made up of small landowners in which decisions to degrade the environment are made not by a few but by millions of landowners, are much more responsible for our problems than any set of religious beliefs.

Both these point to the thesis developed by Wright⁶ in an article, “Responsibility for the Ecological Crisis,” that it is not religious belief but human greed and ignorance that have allowed our culture to come to the point of ecological crisis. Creationists would certainly agree with Wright that to solve our ecological crisis we must come to grips with these basic aspects of human nature. The Bible points out that men have seldom lived up to their responsibilities in this or any other area.

Wayne Friar and Donald Monro make this same point in a discussion of Lynn White's article.⁷ It is not that Scripture has misled men; it is that, because of what the theologian calls original sin, men fail to follow Biblical precepts.

Biblical Precepts Reconsidered

White and McHarg and those who follow them are wrong in fixing the responsibility for encouraging this exploitation. Like so many other people they have forgotten to read beyond the first page of the Bible. God's command to man to subdue the earth and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth can only be understood against the background of the Biblical concept of God's ownership of all earthly resources and man's position as a steward of what God has committed to him.

The Bible teaches that man is indeed the first or most important of God's visible creatures (Gen. 1 and 2). Moreover, man is to subdue the earth and to have dominion over it; for this purpose God gave him a superior brain, and set him apart from the animals by endowing him with ability to communicate, so that the culture and learning of the past can be transmitted to future generations.

Yet man's assignment to rule over the earth and to subdue it must be read in the full context and against the important background of other Biblical statements. Man can hardly claim to own anything. The psalmist proclaims, "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof" (Psalm 24:1), and God says through the psalmist, "Every beast of the field is mine and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air and all that moves in the field is mine." (Psalm 50:10f).

When one accepts the Genesis account of creation he recognizes that the land, the plants, and the animals and air and water belong to God because He made them. Man cannot claim to own anything, and he can hardly claim the right to exploit.

One of the concepts that runs throughout the pages of Scripture is the concept of responsible stewardship. Because man is the crown of God's creation, and because he has been given great intellectual endowments, man has a special responsibility and is expected to care for what has been entrusted to him. He does not possess it; it has been given him to "husband" and to tend, just as our first parents were to till the garden and keep it (Genesis 2: 15).

God is concerned also for the plants and animals which He created. He clothes the lilies of the field in splendor greater than Solomon's (Matt. 6:28ff). He cares for the insignificant sparrows not one of whom falls to the ground without His knowledge and permission (Matt. 10:29). If God is concerned for other living things, then man, his steward, must show similar concern.

One of the reasons for our environmental crisis is the crass materialism of the day. Men have

exploited the world in order to pile up profits. Here, too, the Bible has something to say about those who consider "things" all important and who plan to build larger barns to accommodate all their possessions.

Our Savior devoted a large part of the Sermon on the Mount to pointing out the foolishness of material cares and concerns. A Christian steward takes the long range view of that which has been committed to his charge. He realizes that he cannot pile up short term profits for himself at the expense of that which he will one day be obliged to turn over to his successors. He feels a real sense of responsibility to those who will come after him.

Evolutionary Theory Another Cause

Another important reason for the environmental crisis of the day has been the widespread acceptance of the theory of evolution. It is interesting that White speaks of the last 100 years as being the time when the environmental crisis has become acute because, he says, man has acquired the tools to exploit the environment.

While crass "survival of the fittest" has been repudiated by many evolutionists who find it repugnant because of what the Christian would call God's law written in man's heart at creation, it is a fact that exploitation of the environment by man follows logically from acceptance of the ideas of evolution and survival of the fittest.

In past decades men, who have accepted evolution, have reasoned:

(a) If the unfit are weeded out through ruthless competition, then man has a right to eliminate those species which cannot compete with him.

(b) If nature in an objective and impersonal way has brought man to his present stage of development, and if nature has given him the ability to exploit his environment, then certainly there is nothing wrong with doing just that.

(c) And as far as other plants and animals are concerned, extinction has been the law of evolution in the past. We get along pretty well without the dinosaurs, whose demise can be blamed on nature; why fault man for exterminating the passenger pigeon—and after all someone might say, "Who really misses the passenger pigeon today?"

That evolution and the evolutionary philosophy may lead to an exploitation of the environment is recognized. Frederick Elder in his *Crisis in Eden*, while praising the evolutionist, Loren Eiseley, criticizes Pierre Teilhard de Chardin as an exclusionist, who in his evolutionary system separates man from his environment and encourages man to exploit the environment. Teilhard wrote of transcendence coming at the end of the

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- ¹²Wallace, B. 1967. Chromosomes, giant molecules, and evolution. Macmillan, London, p. 5.
- ¹³Bertalanffy, L. von. 1952. Problems of life. Watts and Co., London, p. 89.
- ¹⁴Popper, K. R. 1961. The poverty of historicism. Second Edition. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, p. 151.
- ¹⁵Popper, *Ibid.*, Chapter 27.
- ¹⁶See Dooyeweerd, H. 1954. The analogical concepts. Translated by R. D. Knudsen. A. A. C. S. (Mimeograph).
- ¹⁷Darwin, C. R. 1859. On the origin of species. John Murray, London.
- ¹⁸Bateson, W. 1894. Materials for the study of variation. Macmillan, New York.
- ¹⁹Fisher, R. A. 1930. The genetical theory of natural selection. Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- ²⁰Huxley, J. S. 1942. Evolution, the modern synthesis. George, Allen and Unwin, London.
- ²¹See Waddington, C. H. (Editor). 1989. Towards a theoretical biology. 2. Sketches. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, pp. 82-128.
- ²²Hershey, A. D. 1970. Genes and hereditary characteristics, *Nature*, 228:697-700.
- ²³"little causal thingummies" in 'Espinasse's phrase. See Grene, M. 1966. The knower and the known. Faber and Faber, London, p. 235.
- ²⁴Note again that a C.F. is always sufficiently elastic to be able to accommodate any observations ("facts").
- ²⁵Huxley, J. S., *Ibid.*, pp. 121-124.
- ²⁶Carter, G. S. 1957. A hundred years of evolution. Sidgwick and Jackson, London, pp. 129-130.
- ²⁷Waddington, C. H. 1957. The strategy of the genes. Allen and Unwin, London.
- ²⁸Mayr, E. 1963. Animal species and evolution. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., pp. 158ff, 263ff.
- ²⁹Dobzhansky, Th. 1955. Evolution, genetics and man. John Wiley and Sons, New York, p. 119.
- ³⁰Waddington, C. H. (Editor). 1968. Towards a theoretical biology. 1. Prolegomena. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, p. 104.
- ³¹See Ho, W. M. 1965. Methodological issues in evolutionary theory. Doctor of philosophy Thesis, Oxford.
- ³²We have what Lakatos calls a "degenerating problem-shift." See Lakatos, I. 1968. Criticism and the methodology of scientific research programmes. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 69:149-186.
- ³³Kerkut, G. A. 1980. Implications of evolution. Pergamon Press, Oxford, p. 155.
- ³⁴See Rushdoony, R. J. 1958. By what standard? Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, Philadelphia.
- ³⁵Morris, H. M. and Whitcomb, J. C. 1961. The Genesis flood. Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, Philadelphia (Evangelical Press, London, 1969).
- ³⁶Mulfinger, G. 1970. Critique of stellar evolution, *Creation Research Society Quarterly*, 7(1):7-24.

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pursuit of the present direction, which Elder believes is likely to result in ecological disaster.

In moving toward the transcendence stage of Omega, man, to put it bluntly, crunches nature by the means of science and technology. Teilhard puts it more elegantly by saying, "Taken in the full modern sense of the word, science is the twin sister of mankind," for "the march of humanity . . . develops indubitably in the direction of conquest of matter put to the service of mind."

Thus Elder believes that Pierre Teilhard's evolutionary philosophy has led him to justify man's exploitation of the world in which he lives.

There is another aspect to be considered, and that is the creationist's attitude toward the world, as contrasted with the attitude of the evolutionist. The creationist believes that God created originally a perfect world, the intricacies of which show God's wisdom. Because God's wisdom is so superior to man's, it is unlikely that man will be able to improve on the world which God created.

Therefore, the creationist is in no hurry to change natural balances and to seek to alter the world which God has created. To be sure God expects man to serve as a sort of manager; he is not to take his talents and bury them in the ground.

Yet this management must be conducted in keeping with and not contrary to the complex balances which God has created. When the creationist sees how each organism fits into its niche, he marvels at God's wisdom and is reluctant to make any changes until he is certain that he will not be inflicting damage.

The evolutionist, on the other hand, regards these balances as the result of chance evolutionary changes. He believes that he can and ought to control and direct the changes which go on continually. The evolutionist is arrogant enough to believe he can improve on nature. He is hardly likely to hesitate to accelerate changes which he believes are bound to take place; and he counts on impersonal natural selection to guarantee survival of the truly fit.

Conclusion

We do have some problems. Perhaps some of the cries that have been raised are unnecessary calls of alarm. But there is enough evidence that the situation is serious and that it demands our attention. What we need is not a repudiation of Scriptural and creationist principles, but a rejection and repudiation of the evolutionary philosophy and a more wide-spread acceptance of the Biblical and creationist view of the place of man.

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- ⁵Moncrief, Lewis W. 1970. The cultural basis for our environmental crisis, *Science*, 170:508-512.
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- ⁸Elder, Frederick. 1970. Crisis in Eden. Abingdon, Nashville, Tennessee, pp. 63-68.