

INVITED PAPER

A CREATIONIST ENVIRONMENTAL ETHIC

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A consistent creationist is an environmentalist. All of nature belongs to God since He is the Creator. Man is a steward of the natural world and he should be a good one. Many instances are cited where man has foolishly upset the balance of nature, not understanding the consequences of his acts.

Introduction

The September 1981 *Audubon Magazine* featured an article entitled "Fundamentals" by Peter Steinhart.¹ The essay was an attack on the Biblical account of creation and creationists. Since the thrust of the *Audubon Magazine* is toward environmental problems, Steinhart made a valiant effort to connect creationism with the exploitation of the environment. He said, "Many fundamentalists believe it is man's duty to develop and exploit nature, citing the Biblical injunction to subdue the earth and have dominion over all living things. Former Interior Secretary James Watt, for example, told the North American Wild Life and Natural Resources Conference 'America's resources were put here for the enjoyment and use of people, now and in the future, and should not be denied to the people by elitist groups'."²

Steinhart quoted the author of this article as disagreeing with the alleged creationist position of exploitation of the environment. The November 1981 *Audubon Magazine* carried a letter of mine to the editor in which I stated that Steinhart's 'Essay' does a disservice to the cause of environmentalism. You see, it is *because* of my religious background that I am a conservationist, environmentalist, or Auduboner. My understanding of Scripture and my science agree. Since I believe that God made all things that I see, it belongs to Him and not to me. His command to Adam was to till the garden and *care* for it, Genesis 2:15. God's concern extends to birds and animals, for He provides them with food, Psalm 147:9. Not a sparrow falls to the ground without His knowledge and concern, Matthew 10:29. The eyes of all—plants, animals and man—wait on Him and He gives them their meat in due season, Psalm 145:15, 16. Because I take seriously what He tells me, I must act as a responsible steward of what He has made and what He owns. I cannot exploit nature because it does not belong to me. Most creationists, I am convinced, will agree with my position. Steinhart is wrong in condemning creationism as it opposes evolution from a scientific

point of view, and he is as wrong as Lynn White, Jr., was in suggesting that creationists advocate exploitation. Quite the contrary is true, if creationists are really consistent.³

Steinhart goes on in his article to state that many Christians who take the Bible at face value hint that the duty of stewardship is only a temporary one; he suggests that because they look for the second coming of our Lord they are motivated in exploitation rather than in conservation. He further states that "perhaps the most important contribution the theory of evolution has made to mankind is the idea that man must take responsibility for life. . . . Evolution tells us that there are limits to the nature we want to manipulate and urges us to form ethical systems aimed at regulating the manipulation. If we are suffering from a crisis of values today, it is largely because we are faced with the need to develop ethics that will fit the biological realities of life. If we do not change those values we are doomed to live, not just the holocaust, but the unspeakable afterwards . . . our environmental policies now rest on evolutionary assumptions . . . the ethic that brings millions to wild life conservationists assumes a kinship between man and animal and a responsibility to the ages . . . to take man out of nature, to draw an end to time, or to call off the biological revolution would be to subvert our ecological outlook."⁴

A Caricature of Creationism

It should be quite clear that Steinhart's discussion is a caricature and misrepresentation of the creationist position. What is needed is not the evolutionary ethic but a return to the environmental ethic of the Scriptures. The problem is not with the Scriptural principles but rather with the problem of their not being followed. It is the evolutionist with his philosophy of survival of the fittest and the struggle for existence which suggests exploitation, not the creationist position.⁵

The world that God created was a good world, Genesis 1:31. The world that He established was perfectly balanced. It was not red in tooth and claw. Only with the coming of sin into the world was there

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suffering and death. Even today the world which God created is basically a good world. For that reason, creationists hesitate to change it with the object of improving it. We ought to recognize that our intelligence is a very limited thing. We must confess with the psalmist, Psalm 73:21, "I was so foolish and ignorant; I was like a beast before you." We ought to recognize that, compared to God, we have at best the intelligence of a chicken. The changes we might make in our environment are about as wise as changes that a chicken might make in its environment. And all too often when we seek to improve, like a chicken, we "lay an egg."

Time after time we have examples of how man in his desire to improve on the natural world has upset the balance of nature. Such was the case when Thomas Austin imported 24 European rabbits into Australia in 1859. The rabbits had no natural enemies and multiplied beyond all expectation. Soon they were eating the grass on which the sheep fed. Attempts to remedy the situation by building a rabbit-proof fence across the continent in Queensland were unsuccessful. A system of bounties was equally unsuccessful because people took advantage of the income that bounties provided. They were careful not to wipe out all the rabbits so that they would have a source of income year after year.⁶

The Aswan dam is another example of man's stupidity. It was assumed that the dam would generate a substantial amount of electricity and add to the gross national product in Egypt. However, there have been a number of effects which have bordered on the catastrophic. The nitrates and phosphates which the Nile River once brought down regularly into the Mediterranean are no longer there. As a result, there has been a marked decline in the Mediterranean sardine take. Another effect has been the rapid spread through the Egyptian population of infestation with parasitic blood flukes whose intermediate hosts are snails. The snails spread through the irrigation canals which have been extended in order to utilize the water which the dam makes available. Also artificial fertilizers must be used now.⁷

Sometimes the balance of nature has been upset accidentally. An example of this was the importation of the gypsy moth into the United States in 1886. It was hoped that by using this moth a native silk industry could be established. The hazards of an exotic organism were recognized and care was taken to prevent the escape of the gypsy moths. However, the moth escaped accidentally and has proved to be a serious pest today.⁸

The state of Florida continues to be involved in an intensive control program to destroy a fist-sized snail which apparently was brought in from Hawaii by a child as a gift for his grandmother. The snail is doing a great deal of damage and is difficult to control because it has no natural enemies.⁹

A weed that can grow almost five meters tall and cause severe rash and blisters in humans is now established in at least 12 counties in the central and western parts of New York state. The Russian "giant hogweed" originally introduced into this country as a curiosity and an ornamental plant, is propagating in the wild,

where it poses a health hazard. It causes a painful skin reaction which results from contact with the plant in the presence of moisture and exposure to sunlight. The skin irritation occurs within 24 to 48 hours after contact with the plant and is followed by swelling and blistering. The plant is perennial, native to the mountainous Caucasus region between the Black and Caspian Seas.¹⁰

God the Creator-Owner

Creationists believe that God is the creator of all things and therefore He is the owner of all. It is not only in the Book of Genesis that we learn this, but this claim is made throughout Scripture as, for example, in Psalm 24:1. It is an axiom that I own what I have made. If I have made something and someone else appropriates it he is guilty of stealing, and I have recourse to the law to get it back and to punish him. According to the Bible, God is the creator. Everything in the universe belongs to Him. We have no claim on it at all.

The picture that Scripture draws of our relationship to the environment and to everything in the universe is that of a steward. We are to care for the world that God created, Genesis 2:15. We cannot make any claims for ourselves. It is God's, and He will hold us responsible if we exploit what really does not belong to us.

Moreover, we have a responsibility of stewardship for future generations. We certainly can use the resources that God has given us; that is clear from the Scriptures. However, they are not to be abused, not to be permanently diminished and not to be exploited.

In this connection it is interesting to examine the Jewish property laws so far as they applied to land. There was no such thing as private real property among the Jews. The property was owned by the tribe who held it in trust for the Lord Himself from whom the tribe had received it. The only private property was held by Caleb as a reward for his faithfulness at the beginning of the Exodus, Joshua 14:6-15.

Accordingly, under the theocracy no property could be sold, Leviticus 25:23. At most it could be leased until the time of jubilee and then it returned to the family who was custodian and steward of that particular part of the tribal inheritance, Leviticus 25:28.

Whether there should be private ownership of land is a political question and a moot question so far as the question of stewardship is concerned. In the western world we have opted for private ownership and are no worse off as far as soil erosion is concerned than societies which have placed ownership of the land in the same category as ownership of other elements of "the commons," air and water. The idea of private property is not the logical consequent of Christianity as Robbins claims.¹¹

The Tragedy of the Commons

One of the concepts that has been developed to make clear what is involved in the exploitation of air, water, and soil is the concept of the tragedy of the commons. According to Hardin who developed this concept, the air, the water, and the soil which must be used by all of us is like the medieval European commons. In Europe people lived in walled villages

for protection. Their land, however, was outside the village wall, and they traveled to their land each day to care for the growing crops. Sometimes the land was at a distance from the individual's home. It was too far to drive his cattle each day, so provision was made either in the village or just outside of it for a commons on which all citizens of the village could graze their animals. So long as the number of cattle was limited, there was no problem because the commons regenerated. However, it was very easy for an individual to reason that if he sneaked onto the commons an extra sheep or an extra cow he would have all the profit from the animal whereas the damage to the commons would be shared by all members of the community.¹²

This is certainly a helpful picture in understanding the problems that arise when we exploit the air, the water, and the soil. The exploiter often profits at the expense of the entire community. What is most significant is that from the creationist standpoint he is violating God's directive to care for what He has given us.

It is also interesting to note that God cares for all, not just for man, Psalm 145:15ff. Specifically He cares for the birds, Deut. 22:6f. The Psalmist tells us that He cares for both man and beast, Psalm 36:6. In Exodus 23:11 we are told that the fields were to be permitted to lie fallow every seven years to provide food not only for the poor but also for the wild animals. In the New Testament our Savior tells us that not a sparrow falls to the ground without God's permission. It is clear that our God has a concern not only for man but for all creatures.

The Fall Into Sin

Today we suffer from two problems, both of which are the result of the fall into sin. First of all man tends to exploit. He takes advantage of the commons. He utilizes what God has created for all people for his own personal benefit. We are all selfish and exploiters at heart, and it does not do to point a finger at others. To quote Pogo, "We have met the enemy and he is us."

But we also face a problem because of the limitations of our minds. We do not have the wisdom that God has, and some of our environmental problems are due, not to selfishness, but to man's lack of wisdom. Sometimes we simply do not know how to use well the gifts that God has given us. Such was the case with DDT. Here was a discovery which God permitted us to make that had tremendous potential for good. It was an effective insecticide and might well have been used to reduce substantially the number of deaths on a world-wide scale from malaria, the disease which has been the major killer in historical times.

To use it against the mosquitos which spread malaria would have required selective application of the insecticide. But DDT was a new toy. It was effective not only against mosquitos but against other insects. Some of these insects, it is true, created problems which warranted careful control. Others were chiefly nuisances. However, this new tool made it possible for us to attack a wide-range of insects, and we used DDT indiscriminately.¹³

For example, large quantities of DDT were used in a vain attempt to wipe out the beetle that transmitted

the Dutch elm disease. The problem was due to the introduction of the pest insect accidentally. However, as a result of our efforts large quantities of DDT reached the soil and eventually were found in the tissues of most organisms, including man. Moreover, DDT attacked not only the harmful insects but insects that were useful, such as honeybees, as well.

Man simply did not have the intelligence to use wisely this gift which God permitted him to discover.

Needed — A Return to the Biblical Ethic

A return to the Biblical ethic and to an acceptance of Biblical principles is needed. We must recognize and practice stewardship. God is the Creator and Owner; because it is His gift to us we have no claim on what He has placed in the environment for us. He does not forbid our use of it; He has put it there for our benefit and enjoyment. However, we are not to exploit it selfishly but we are to care for it so that we can pass it on to future generations.

We also need to recognize our limitations. We need to realize that man is likely at best to muddle through many of the environmental problems. Men and women of the 20th century are an arrogant lot. We look down our noses at the people of past generations. We do indeed stand tall, but we stand tall only because we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. Moreover, many of them enjoyed the same amenities that we enjoy. We are surprised by the monuments of the ancient world, by the pyramids of Egypt, by Stonehenge and by the Mayan temples in Guatemala and the Yucatan. We simply find it impossible to believe that ignorant savages could have built these. Yet many of these represent engineering feats which we could not achieve today. We need to be more humble when we seek to evaluate the past. Our attempts to improve on God's creation may well end in disaster, for we are not more intelligent than those who have gone before us.

The consistent creationist is an environmentalist because he recognizes God as his Creator and the Creator of everything. He realizes, too, that he is but a steward with stewardship responsibilities. It is the consistent evolutionist who destroys in the name of survival of the fittest. The creationist seeks to preserve the good world over which God has made him steward.

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