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### Environmentalism

(First in series, Contemporary Issues in Religion and Morality)

*Psalm 24:1; Genesis2:15; Genesis 7:1-3,5; Job 38:1,2,7; Leviticus 25:1-5,23 NRSV*

Something or other about the care of the earth seems to come to our attention every day. There is the big issue of global warming. Environmental concerns don't get much bigger than global although there has been talk in recent years of near space around earth becoming cluttered with space junk, yet surely the more pressing need would be for the hygiene of the earth itself.

Perhaps we have all experienced the results of pollution that changed either the look of things, the smell of things, the safety of things, the nutritional value of things, the durability of things, the livability of things, or the simple pleasure of things. We also know of oil spills, nuclear power plant meltdowns, chemical accidents, habitat destruction, and the overuse of antibiotics which can result in the quick evolution of new bacteria that are antibiotic resistant—a sort of microbial pollution. With about 6,000,000,000 people now on earth we might not be startled at how the environment is effected. And perhaps the natural rejuvenating properties of the earth are still our greatest hope, like those of the human body always working to restore its natural balance. But there are some things from which the body does not recover and sometimes there are things that we can do to help its recovery along. For people of faith, in all good things we are partners with God.

The religious response to environmental concerns has varied widely. When I was a younger person I thought that of all the issues of modern life, concern for the physical environment would be shared by just about everyone, perhaps especially religious people. My thinking went something like this. Of course we all know that we should take care of the planet we have been given on which to live! Of course no one would want to justify significant deterioration or even destruction of our human habitat! Of course religious people would show gratitude for what they have been given by emphasizing the obligation to take care of it!

Of course, now I know that I was wrong.

I know now that all manner of religious misunderstanding and poor biblical interpretation continue today, as ever, including that which relates to environmental

concerns. Some of this misperception sounds rather self-serving to me. There really are Christian leaders out there saying pretty much that nature will take care of itself, and heal itself, no matter what we do.

An example is a sermon I recently came across called Man and Nature, by Scott Coltrain, a minister in the Church of Christ, not to be confused with the United Church of Christ. In addition to emphasizing the special privilege humankind enjoys in the natural order of things and the right to use whatever earth has to offer in satisfaction of human need or desire, it was what Coltraine calls Truth # 3 that really caught my attention. He first states its premise. Here it is. Truth # 3, **God Will Preserve Nature's Balance**. "Many fear an environmental catastrophe." Coltrain writes. "Many fear global warming. The person who believes in God's promises need not fear. For God has promised to maintain a planet on which man will be able to survive and enjoy. **God is continually preserving Nature's Balance.**" (Coltrain) Now I suppose Coltrain is not saying that we can be both loyal to Christ **and** trash the planet but it sounds close to that to me.

In contrast to the emphasis that Coltrain and others like him may make, here are what I believe to be three sensible Christian perspectives on the environment supported by sound biblical interpretation.

First of all, it is God's earth. It really is. It does not belong to us. *The earth is the Lord's*, says the Psalmist, *and the fullness thereof*. Surely this does not mean that since it is God's earth we can do whatever we want to it and God will just continue to fix it for us. Wouldn't that be a rather irresponsible understanding? Instead, since it is God's earth, ought we not respect it as belonging to someone else and so not ruin it? The biblical idea is that we are sort of like children who live in their parents' house. It is not the children's house, although they call it that; it is not really theirs, it belongs to the parents. The children are welcome to live there, in fact, the parents delight in the children living there, but the children need to follow some rules and do some chores. They may need to take out the trash and clean their rooms and maybe sometimes cut the grass. If the earth is the Lord's then we are privileged to live here as tenants, not owners. *For the land is mine*, God said to Moses on Mount Sinai, *with me you are but aliens and tenants*. And we have not been charged a security deposit. We come into the world full broke. What moral obligations might such a circumstance carry for us?

Second, human beings are themselves part of nature. We are physical creatures. We need the earth and the air and the plants and the animals. We are interdependent with them. What is good for them is good for us and vice versa. Let us not be confused. We are made a little lower than the angels, not as heavenly beings, but earthly. To think that human beings were in any way created above nature or outside of nature is contrary to the biblical message. The idea that human beings are a part of the evolutionary process is biblical because it grounds us to the earth. Out of the dust of the ground, according to the Genesis account, the Lord God formed man and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. We are a part of the natural order of things. And our earthiness is not something of which to be ashamed or about which to feel humiliated. We are part of the physical creation which God called good.

Third, our responsibility is to take care of the earth. *The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it.* It is ours to till (use) and **keep** (preserve). Do you think that jurisdiction is over the land only, and not the animals? Does it matter if the spotted owl becomes extinct? Does the spotted owl belong to God? Steven Whitney, in [An Earth Day Sermon](#), says that it is hard to imagine all the animals going up the ramp into the ark two by two, a male and female of each species so as to continue them, yet allowing today without a second thought some of them to go down the gangplank to extinction. (Whitney) If it happens by natural processes so be it, *the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof*, but can we take it upon ourselves to cause the demise of any creature as if it belonged to us?

Whitney tells a story from the Jewish tradition of when Noah is loading the Ark with the camels and water buffaloes and goats, when up the ramp comes a pair of tiny gnats. According to the story, Noah turned to God and said, "You want me to save the gnats? Of what possible value could they be?" And God replied, "Yes, Noah, save the gnats. They hold many secrets you may never know." Would we be arrogant enough to influence the destruction of what God found important to establish? *Who is this that darkens counsel without knowledge?* God spoke to Job out of the whirlwind. *Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth, when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?* (Whitney)

For environmentalism, as for other things, the religious motivation can be the highest of all. To recognize that the earth belongs to God, that human beings do not own it but are as tenants of the land, that God did not create us apart from the earth but of it and that we have responsibility to take care of it in grateful response to the privilege of living here, this is the historic biblical perspective and eminent calling of Christian people in response to environmental concerns.

For people of biblical faith, the earth is a sacred trust. Let us prove worthy of it.

Coltrain, Scott. "Man and Nature." *sermoncentral*. Web. 16 Sept. 2011

Whitney, Steven. "An Earth Day Sermon." *earthministry*. 30 Dec. 2005. Web. 12 Sept. 2011.