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Christianity and the Environment: Escapist Mysticism or Responsible Stewardship

Sermon preached by Professor R. J. Berry at St. Paul's Church, Sketty, Swansea on 19 August 1990 at an Ecumenical Service to mark the beginning of SCIENCE 90, the 152nd Annual Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science.

Summary: *Christians (or the 'Judaeo-Christian tradition') have repeatedly been cast as the villains behind environmental damage. This depends on a wrong understanding of God as remote from the world (a 'God of the Gaps', who is perhaps merely a 'blind watchmaker') and of mankind as qualitatively inseparable from other animals and not accountable to God. It is here argued that the mechanical (or material) cause of an event (which answers the question 'how?') is only part of its explanation, and needs complementing by a formal description of its cause (which answers the question 'why?'), and that we have to recognize that science cannot supply answers to all questions. This opens the possibility of a reasonable faith in a God who creates and sustains our world.*

Christianity, properly understood, leads to a responsible stewardship of the environment and not to flagrant abuse or escapist mysticism; it converges with and provides an undergirding to secular thinking as expressed by the Brundtland Commission (on sustainable development) and the Economic Summit Nations (on environmental ethics). But the Bible goes further in urging an awe for creation, and identifying the regularity of crops and seasons as a 'clue' to God's activity. Christians have a positive contribution to make in environmental teaching and practice, and ought to be bolder in their witness.

Key Words: Eastern Religions, Environment, Ethics, Francis of Assisi, Gaia, Image of God, Mysticism, Stewardship, Sustainable Development.

Editorial Note: *Although a sermon is heard and probably should be read without interruption, the author has supplied notes and references for the purposes of this journal together with an expanded bibliography on environmental issues, which stands in its own right as a contribution to the present debates.*

Jim Lovelock, High Priest of Gaia¹ (he calls himself shop steward for non-human organisms) identifies the chief villains in damaging the

¹ Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, named after the Greek Earth Goddess, (Lovelock, 1979: 10) proposes that the temperature and composition of the Earth's surface are actively regulated by living organisms and held by homeostatic regulation close to values which are necessary or

atmosphere as cars, chain-saws and cows.² Can Christians—speaking as Christians—say anything about cars, chain-saws or cows?

St. Francis of Assisi, appointed by the Pope as 'Patron Saint of Ecology', preached to the birds and talked to the flowers.³ Can science say anything about this—other than recoiling in bewilderment?

Ian McHarg, a Glaswegian who became Professor of Landscape Architecture and Town Planning at the University of Pennsylvania, has described Genesis 1:26, 28 ('God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness, to have dominion over the fish in the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, all wild animals on land, and everything that creeps on the earth" . . . and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase, fill the earth and subdue it. . . ."') as 'one text of compounded horror which will

comfortable for their continued existence (Margulis & Lovelock, 1989), in contrast to the traditional assumption that life is surrounded by and adapts to/is created for an essentially stable environment. As such, it is an entirely proper scientific hypothesis, subject to experimental test in the normal way (Craik, 1989). However, many people have made theological or metaphysical extrapolations from the original theory, encouraged in part by Lovelock's own expositions (e.g. Lovelock, 1988). Montefiore (1985) has interpreted the fact that the Earth's atmosphere is maintained well away from thermodynamic equilibrium (which is the observation that led Lovelock to his hypothesis) as evidence for the anthropic principle (Clifton, 1990; Osborn, 1990), and believes that Gaia is an indication of 'the probability of God'. Others have speculated even more widely (Myers, 1984; Allaby, 1989).

Many people would like to manage the world for its own sake, yet can find no compelling motive, other than anthropocentric utilitarianism. Ashby (1979) has argued that in any environmental valuation, we must have regard to the interests of self, community, posterity and nature itself; he suggests that a landscape of unpolluted habitat should be regarded as having an intrinsic value, in the same way as a Beethoven sonata or a Renaissance mural.

In a celebrated legal case in California, the Sierra Club sought to prevent Walt Disney Enterprises developing a ski resort high in the Sierra Mountains. The court found against the Club on the grounds that the Club was not going to be injured itself, and therefore had no legal standing to sue against the development. Christopher Stone, a legal philosopher, argued that something was going to be injured, and the courts should take note of the need for protection (Nash, 1989: 128–131). Although his request 'Should trees have standing?' was rejected by the court, the judgment was not unanimous, and there has been subsequent debate on the subject in academic legal circles. Christians, of course, have no problem in justifying nature's value, since the world belongs to God, He has declared it 'good', and entrusted it to our care (see Note no. 24).

2 Global warming (the 'greenhouse effect') is now generally accepted (IPCC, 1990) although existing data are still possible to interpret as normal climatic fluctuations. There are a number of 'greenhouse gases' blanketing the earth, but quantitatively the most important one is carbon dioxide, which is produced in human-influenced increased amounts by motor exhausts, burning of fuel (often cut by chain-saws), and large numbers of cows, whose metabolism leads to much more carbon dioxide release than by other organisms.

3 Francis of Assisi's (1182–1240) language and thought (best known through his 'Canticle of the Creation', on which the hymn 'All creatures of our God and King' is based) is more like that of Eastern mystics or the North American Chief Seattle's approach than that of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. He extended the commandments to love God and one's neighbour to include all creation, in a way that seems to blur the divisions and distinctions between humans and nature. However, his attitude was primarily one of accepting God's goodness in everything, rather than the pantheism of which he is often accused. His worship was centred on Christ's work, and this led him to a deep personal humility (Santmire, 1985: 106–119). In 1980 Pope John Paul II declared him to be the patron saint of ecology.

guarantee that the relationship of man to nature can only be destruction, which will atrophy any creative skill, . . . which will explain all of the despoliation accomplished by western man for at least these 2000 years; you do not have to look any further than this ghastly, calamitous text'.⁴ The Genesis story 'in its insistence upon dominion and subjugation of nature, encourages the most exploitative and destructive instincts in man rather than those that are deferential and creative. . . . God's affirmation about man's dominion was a declaration of war on nature'.

An American historian, Lynn White, has written similarly, albeit more temperately: 'By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects'.⁵

What can the Christian reply to all this? Is it possible to do anything except repent and apologize? Does the 'environmental crisis' expose the stupidity (or worse, the danger) of Christian faith? There are certainly many people who see our environmental problems as a clear indication of the failure of traditional belief, and seek hope from a mystical identification with the earth and the life, which they claim to find in hypothetical unifying forces, and on which they build a 'creation spirituality' instead of a Christ-filled life.⁶ Jonathan Porritt, environmental guru *par excellence*, for example, sees the 'new' Christianity as one which substitutes an immanent for a transcendent God, not recognizing that the Bible God is both immanent and transcendent. (These proposals are a re-run of the gnostic heresy which occupied the first centuries of the Christian era).⁷

4 McHarg (1969: 26). Stott (1984: 109–121) takes McHarg as his main example of secular attack on a Christian understanding of the environment.

5 White's (1967) essay on 'the historical roots of our ecologic crisis' has been reprinted many times (see, for example, Schaeffer, 1970), and quoted as a proof of Judaeo-Christian inanity applying God-given human dominion. Although his paper has had considerable influence (see, for example Passmore, 1974: 5), it has been challenged on historical grounds (Welbourn, 1975; Atfield, 1983). Many of the ideas castigated by White are derived from the Greeks rather than the Bible. Notwithstanding, White correctly identifies the anthropocentrism of traditional Christian approaches to nature. However, this was combined throughout most Christian history with a clear understanding and acceptance of humans as God's vice-gerents (i.e. stewards accountable to God) (Glacken, 1967; Black, 1970; Atfield, 1983). This interpretation of history has been challenged by Passmore (1974), but his arguments have been strongly countered by Atfield (1983). On the reification of nature, see note 24 (an argument dealt with particularly by Faricy, 1982).

6 'Creation-centred spirituality' is associated particularly with two North American Roman Catholics, Matthew Fox (1983, 1990), and Thomas Berry (1988). It concentrates on the 'original blessing' of God in creation, rather than on sin (and redemption). In many ways, it is a version of the fallacy that we are morally evolving beings, an idea linked particularly in recent years with Teilhard de Chardin (q.v. Jones, 1969). Suffering is interpreted as the birth pangs of a new creation, a necessary part of the journey to new life. Support for such thinking is claimed from so-called Celtic spirituality (e.g. Van De Weyer, 1990; see also Martin & Inglis, 1984), Francis of Assisi and mediaeval mysticism.

7 q.v. Porritt & Winner (1988), especially pp. 252–3. The links between contemporary 'green' thinking and the Gnostics and Manichaeans of the early centuries of the Christian Church have been explored by Derrick (1972). The classical refutation of gnosticism is, of course, Paul's Colossian letter, and this repays study in the face of demands by some for a new environmental theology, much of which would seek to add to Christ's work (q.v. Lucas, 1980).

There are some interesting parallels to be drawn in these doctrinal writhings with the various evolutionary debates over the past century or so—(There is nothing under the sun): Paley's God was essentially transcendent; Darwin's demolition of the assumed fixed world of the deists brought God back into the world from remoteness above 'the bright blue sky';⁸ there were a host of 'inner essence' theories produced by palaeontologists during the 1920s to explain the apparent differences between the fossil record and genetical evolution (these were all shown to be unnecessary and misleading when the neo-Darwinism synthesis emerged during the 1930s⁹); and the repeated attempts to find an evolutionary ethic (associated particularly with Julian Huxley, C. H. Waddington, G. G. Simpson, Peter Singer) have never found wide acceptance, perhaps because they do not fully explain human aspirations and needs.¹⁰

I wish that some history would underlie environmental proselytizing! But this is not the place to develop these warnings.

Error and Orthodoxy

Has basic Christian orthodoxy anything positive to contribute to the environmental debate? Can the Church do any better than affirm it has something more to say than putting the Benedictine tradition of management alongside the more contemplative Franciscan one,¹¹ or pointing out that the Japanese, the Russians and (say) the Nepalese have been no more effective in looking after their environment than the reviled Judaeo-

8 Up to the end of the eighteenth century, there was every reason to assume that the world was only a few thousand years old, and in much the state that it was at the Creation (complicated by the Fall).

The recognition that change has taken place in the natural world (much of it independent of human action, such as the extinction of the dinosaurs and other taxa at the end of the Tertiary) effectively destroyed the possibility of belief in perfect adaptation of organisms to their environment and the operation of deterministic natural laws (Ospovat, 1981). There is considerable irony in realizing that the biblical God who is both immanent and transcendent was brought back to common acceptance through the Darwinian revolution, which led to the demise of deist assumptions, popularly represented by Paley's parable of God as a Divine watchmaker.

9 The debate between palaeontologists and geneticists was resolved scientifically, without recourse to or incorporation of mystical elements (Fisher, 1954; Mayr & Provine, 1980; Berry, 1982).

10 Huxley, 1947 (see also Paradis & Williams, 1989; Simpson, 1950; Waddington, 1960; Singer, 1981. Rachels (1990) has reviewed the search for an evolutionary ethic: he argues the case for 'moral individualism' which, translated into theological language, is not far distant in its outworking from the personal accountability rediscovered by the Reformers.

11 René Dubos has suggested that Benedict (480-550) ought to be the patron saint of ecology. Benedict reacted against the mostly solitary and frequently severe asceticism which infiltrated the church of his time from the Christian East; his order was based on combining physical work with contemplation (*ora et labora*). Dubos (1970: 126) argues that humanity needs an 'ecologically sensitive but activist spirit' involving 'creative intervention in the earth', rather than the more passive Franciscan approach.

Christians of the West?¹² Indeed it has, and there has been significant work by a host of theologians (Santmire, Moule, Austin Baker, Montefiore, Gregorios, etc.)¹³ and churches (documents produced by the Church of England in 1968 for the 'Countryside in 1970' Conferences, and in 1986 in response to the World Conservation Strategy;¹⁴ the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Programme of the World Council of Churches;¹⁵ the Religion and Conservation Network sponsored by the World Wide Fund for Nature;¹⁶ and many others). But its effectiveness depends on righting two misunderstandings:

1. *Mechanism* It has been said that God began to be squeezed out of his world in 1543, the year historians give to the beginning of western science (when Copernicus's *Astronomy* and Vesalius's *Anatomy* were published), and observation and experiment began to replace uncritical acceptance of tradition. The discovery of effects linked to specific causes brought the reasonable assumption that effects were wholly due to particular identifiable causes. And as the causes of more and more phenomena were uncovered, there was decreasing room for God's activity; he became relegated to the ever-smaller gaps in knowledge, becoming a spiritual insurance rather than an effective power. But to understand causation this way is to be guilty of doctrinaire reductionism (which is completely different from the empirical reductionism of scientific method).¹⁷ As long ago as the fourth century BC, Aristotle recognized the complex nature of causation. Take the example of television: our apprehension of a programme depends on ionizations on a cathode ray tubes stimulating depolarization in neural pathways between retina and fore-brain. In principle we can describe the whole process in

12 Introducing a Conference on Environmental Ethics, Jacques Delors, President of the European Community, commented: 'I have to say that the Oriental religions have failed to prevent to any marked degree the appropriation of the natural environment by technical means . . . In other words, despite different traditions, the right to use or exploit nature seems to have found in industrialized countries the same favour, the same freedom to develop, the same economic justification' (Bourdeau, Fasella & Teller, 1990: 22).

13 Moule, 1964; Montefiore, 1970; Taylor, 1975; Gregorios, 1978; Elsdon, 1981; Moss, 1982; Moltmann, 1985; Santmire, 1985; Granberg-Michaelson, 1987; Bradley, 1990; Cooper, 1990.

14 Board for Social Responsibility, 1972, 1986.

15 The 'integrity of creation' was added to the traditional Christian concerns of peace and justice at the Vancouver Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1983, which called for a 'conciliar process of mutual commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation' (JPIC). Regional JPIC assemblies were held in the late 1980s (the biggest being a European Ecumenical Assembly in Basel, Switzerland, 15–21 May, 1989) in preparation for a WCC meeting in Canberra in 1991. The documents and proceedings of the Basel Assembly have been published by the Conference of European Churches (1988, 1989).

16 The World Wildlife Fund (now the Worldwide Fund for Nature) (WWF) sponsored an interfaith ceremony at Assisi as part of its 25th anniversary celebrations, and issued 'Declarations on Nature' by Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews and Moslems (WWF, 1986). Following Assisi, WWF set up an international network of Conservation and Religion co-ordinated by the Manchester-based International Consultancy on Religion, Education and Culture (ICOREC), with a newsletter, *The New Road*.

17 Reductionism is a necessary and proper part of scientific method, but *methodological* reductionism must be distinguished from *ontological* reductionism, which involves a claim or assumption that complex wholes are 'nothing but' their component parts (Ayala, 1974; Peacocke, 1986: 1–20)

terms of physics and chemistry. But even the most dedicated scientists among us are not usually interested in physics and chemistry when we are watching TV; our concern is with a story plot or sports result or current happening. This distinction is important; in practice, we can describe the same physical event in either physical or teleological terms, in terms of electronics or the intention in the mind of the TV producer; although our descriptions refer to the same entity, they do not overlap or conflict in any way.¹⁸

God's activity can be described in exactly the same way, in physical or in metaphysical language. It is logically improper to deny that God is active simply because we may know the physical cause of an event. Indeed science cannot pronounce on the subject, because as Nobel Laureate and unbeliever Peter Medawar pointed out in one of his last books, science has limits because of its methodology.¹⁹

If we view God's work in this complementary fashion, apparently naive Bible statements begin to make sense. God can be acknowledged as Creator, as well as operating through the mechanisms of evolution;²⁰ he can be seen to have a purpose for individuals; and links between behaviour and material blessing (such as in the Promised Land, e.g. Lev. 26:3ff.; Deut. 28:1ff.) become comprehensible.²¹ God has not been disproved or made ineffective by scientific determinism; rather, His presence and power can

18 The most persuasive advocate of complementarity has been Donald MacKay (1978, 1979, etc.). I owe my example of television to MacKay (1960).

19 In the *Limits of Science*, Medawar (1984: 66) wrote: 'That there is indeed a limit upon science is made very likely by the existence of questions that science cannot answer and that no conceivable advances of science would empower it to answer. These are the questions that children ask—the 'ultimate questions' of Karl Popper. I have in mind such questions as:

How did everything begin?
What are we all here for?
What is the point of living?

Doctrinaire positivism—now something of a period piece—dismissed all such questions as non-questions or pseudoquestions such as only simpletons ask and only charlatans of one kind or another profess to be able to answer. This peremptory dismissal leaves one empty and dissatisfied, because the questions make sense to those who ask them, and the answers to those who give them; but whatever else may be in dispute, it would be universally agreed that it is not to science that we should look for answers'.

In her autobiography, Medawar's widow noted that *The Limits of Science* 'stressed that science should not be expected to provide solutions to problems such as the purpose of life or the existence of God, for which it was unfitted' (Medawar, 1990: 220).

20 Frederick Temple seems to have been one of the first of many to point out in his 1884 Bampton Lectures that an acceptance of the fact that evolution has occurred does not preclude acknowledging God as Creator.

21 Links between obedience and prosperity are repeatedly described in the Bible. The connection should be seen as God's blessing as we work with Him, rather than as automatic rewards for good behaviour.

be accepted as more all-pervading once we recognize that the world is not only a machine and that God is not only a divine watchmaker.²²

2. *Mankind* We are animals, but not only animals; we are 'made in God's image' (Gen. 1:26) and only when the Lord God breathed the 'breath of life' into the individual did the 'living creature' emerge. God's image refers to relationship rather than physical traits.²³ Put at its simplest: if a God is worth belief, he must be reliable; if we are in his image, we must be trustable and hence accountable. Herein lies the basis for obedience to divine commands, and judgement for disobedience.

This helps us to understand the creation mandate of dominion, so roundly condemned by McHarg. The Genesis command is made explicitly in the context of a human species qualitatively different from the rest of animals, and our dominion is exercised on God's behalf. As we acknowledge every time we say the Creed, we live in a world made by God and which he has entrusted to us as tenants, stewards or trustees. Christ spelt this out in various ways, perhaps most directly in such parables as the unjust steward (Lk. 12:42-48), the talents (Lk. 19:12-27) and the absentee landlord (Lk. 20:9-18).²⁴

22 The assumption of Richard Dawkins that Paley's Divine Watchmaker is nothing more than a Blind Watchmaker of automatic mechanism is partially true; it is wrong to seek proof of the existence of God by an analysis of natural processes. However, Dawkins' book *The Blind Watchmaker* is not primarily an anti-God tract, but an answer to difficulties inherent in evolution itself, such as the involvement of chance and the occurrence of 'perfect' structures like the mammalian eye or ear. For example, the objection that evolution is as unlikely as a roomful of monkeys with typewriters to replicate the works of Shakespeare reveals a misunderstanding of natural selection. Once an adaptive structure (or gene sequence) is produced, it will be maintained and added to; it does not have to be produced afresh in every generation (Dawkins, 1986: 46-50).

23 Many modern theologians (following Karl Barth) understand 'image' in terms of relationships rather than any physical, behavioural or genetic trait (Thorpe, 1962, 1978; Berry, 1987). Moule (1964) writes, 'Perhaps the most satisfying of the many interpretations, both ancient and modern, of the meaning of the image of God in man is that which sees it as basically responsibility . . . God is a 'faithful Creator'—that is, a trustworthy, consistent Creator, one who, in that sense, is responsible. Now man is responsible in the sense that he must render an account before God: 'We must all appear at God's tribunal' (Rom. 14:10). But if we ask for what is man responsible to God, at least one biblical answer is, for ruling over the rest of creation on this planet: man is responsible for ruling nature, and in this sense, he bears God's image. In a word, he is God's vice-gerent within creation. . . . Any purely biological view sees man as capable, indeed, in a unique degree, of controlling his environment. But to say that he is intended to control it, and, in this, is God-like, is to bring in the notion of purpose: and teleology is no part of biology as such, nor can it be part of any non-religious view' (see also MacDonald, 1981; Blocher, 1984; Hall, 1986).

24 Stewardship is an inevitable implication of our nature as creatures in God's image; and importantly, we 'are not related to God through nature, but nature is related to God through us' (Faricy, 1982: 5). In the Old Testament, God is understood as absolutely transcendent and the world as non-divine. This de-divinization of nature is a basic premise for technology and political and social progress. The problem is that this leads to an attitude that nature is only 'a thing'; however, this tendency is counteracted by the New Testament emphasis on God's immanence in and redemption of the world through his Son and Spirit (e.g. Jn. 1:1-3; Eph. 1:9, 10; Col. 1:3-2:15; Phil. 2:5-11; Rom. 8:18-25; Heb. 1:2, 3).

A danger in the modern use of stewardship is that we limit its meaning: 'Stewardship has failed where it has been reduced to a reasonable way of managing time, talent, and treasure for the sake of the kingdom' (Jøgen, 1987).

It is, of course, easy to deny that we are any more than naked apes, separated from chimpanzees by less than 2% of our DNA, but it is impossible to prove that we are only animals or that we are not dependent on or responsible to God. As the writer to the Hebrews points out, 'by faith we understand that the universe was formed by God's command, so that the visible came forth from the invisible' (Heb. 11:3); we know God and his works by faith, not by scientific experiment.²⁵

Christian Stewardship and Sustainable Development

Darwin came to his recognition of natural selection by combining the concept of a struggle for existence with the observation of biological variation. If we follow a similar procedure, and bring together the notion of divine activity with the nature of mankind, we are faced with a clear call to a Christian stewardship over the whole of creation—not as commonly applied in church circles, but over all plants and animals, over living and non-living resources alike, over landscape and community. And stewardship involves management, not preservation;²⁶ it entails looking after the world primarily for God to whom it belongs by creation and redemption, and only secondarily for ourselves and our fellow humans. Conservation is about God in the first place, not human survival or comfort. For, as Paul wrote to the Colossians, Christ Jesus has 'the primacy over all creation. In him everything in heaven and on earth was created. . . . He exists before all things, and all things are held together in him. . . . God chose through him to reconcile all things to himself making peace through the blood of the cross—all things, whether on earth or in heaven' (Col. 1:15–20). The Bible does not, like the Greeks, look back to a recoverable paradise; it begins in a garden (which itself needs management) and ends in a city.

The truth, of course is that we have failed in our stewardship. It does not matter whether or not we acknowledge our commitment to be stewards, there can be no dissent we have misused and abused our world to the extent that permanent damage may have been caused. We have followed too uncritically the lead of Bacon and Descartes who set the social values

25 Possibly one of the reasons why Christians have failed to espouse a more powerful doctrine of creation and the environment is because of their debates about evolution. In other words, creation has been regarded as the beginning and end of the faith–science debate, whereas the scriptural emphasis is meant more to teach us that we are stewards of God's good world (Blocher, 1984; Moltmann, 1985; Berry, 1988).

26 There is a tendency in both secular and religious writings to look back to a supposedly ideal time, and to seek ways of reversing current trends (Glacken, 1967). For example, Milton's *Paradise Lost* has exercised an enormous influence. From the Christian point of view, part of the problem lies in different exegeses of Rom. 8:19–22, which has been understood by some to mean that 'nature' will be restored, but in context refers specifically to the Spirit's work in humans; the passage speaks of creation suffering as a consequence of human sin. Kidner (1967:73) describes the situation as 'leaderless, the choir of creation can only grind in discord'. In other words, Paul is writing of the failure of human stewardship rather than the causal decay of environment; his argument is that as long as we refuse (or are unable through sin) to play the role created for us by God, the natural world will be dislocated and frustrated. The Romans passage is therefore about relationships, and complements the understanding and implication of human nature shaped by God's image (see note 23).

that enjoin us to 'effect all things possible' and to 'render ourselves the masters and possessors of nature'.²⁷ In words used originally, I think, by Ruskin but repeated by many including Mrs Thatcher, 'we are stealing the inheritance of our children'.²⁸ The Brundtland Commission restated time after time the crucial need for sustainable development if we are going to have (in the title of their Report), any *Common Future* at all.²⁹ Chris Patten laid it on the line at a speech in the City a few months ago.³⁰ He said, 'Only through development which is sustainable can countries such as ours continue to grow. And more importantly, only in this way can less well developed countries break the vicious downward spiral of poverty leading to environmental degradation, leading to greater poverty, and so on'.

Environmental Ethics

Where does all this get us? Do Christians have anything to say to the world about the environment? I believe we do. In 1986 the World Wildlife Fund (as it then was) held its 25th anniversary celebrations at Assisi, and called upon the world's religions to assert their commitment to conservation. Declarations on 'man and nature' were produced in the name of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism.³¹ The Christian statement was not strong, and the Duke of Edinburgh (who is President of WWF International) subsequently convened a series of meetings at Windsor on

27 See Russell (1985), especially chapter 4.

28 Ruskin wrote: 'God has lent us the earth for our life; it is a great entail. It belongs as much to those who are to come after us and whose names are already written in the book of creation, as to us; and we have no right, by anything we do or neglect, to involve them in unnecessary penalties, or deprive them of benefits which it was in our power to bequeath . . . Men cannot benefit those that are with them as they can benefit those who come after them; and of all the pulpits from which human voice is ever sent forth, there is none from which it reaches so far as from the grave'. Jacques Delors (1990: 23) expressed this as: 'We have not inherited the earth from our ancestors, we have borrowed it from our children'; Mrs Thatcher (q.v. *This Common Inheritance*, 1990: 10) has reminded us that 'we do not have a freehold on our world, but only a full repairing lease'.

29 The Brundtland Commission is the name by which the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) is usually known, after its Chairman, Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland, one-time Prime Minister of Norway. The WCED was set up by the United Nations Organization in 1983 on the pattern of the Brandt Report (on economics) and the Palme Report (on disarmament) to:

- 1 Re-examine the critical issues of environment and development and to formulate innovative, concrete, and realistic action proposals to deal with them.
- 2 Strengthen international co-operation on environment and development and to assess and propose new forms of co-operation that can break out of existing patterns and influence policies and events in the direction of needed change.

The Brundtland Commission Report was published in 1987; an assessment of its achievements so far has been compiled by Starke (1990).

30 At Coopers & Lybrands, 27 March 1990. Sustainable development can be defined as 'a process of social and economic betterment that satisfies the needs and values of all interest groups, while maintaining future options and conserving natural resources and diversity'.

31 See note 16. The intention of the Assisi meeting was 'to link the secular movement for the conservation of nature with the religious perception of nature as the creation of a supreme being' (Edinburgh & Mann, 1989: 11).

'the Christian Attitude to Nature'.³² He challenged those attending with a question, 'There must be a moral as well as a practical argument for environment conservation. What is it?'

The answer, of course, is responsible stewardship and this is the key to the values which determine our actions towards the environment.

Exactly the same answer was given at a conference convened by the Economic Summit Nations last year,³³ which defined an environmental ethic as involving:

Stewardship of the living and non-living systems of the earth in order to maintain their sustainability for present and future, allowing development with equity. Health and quality of life for humankind are ultimately dependent on this.

A surprising number of consequences follow the acceptance of such an ethic. It involves characteristics which can be regarded as belonging to all good citizens or organizations, such as truthfulness, freedom of choice, justice and so on. But more importantly, it implies obligations such as that all environmental impacts should be fully assessed in advance for their effect on the community, posterity, and nature itself, as well as on the individual interest; that regular monitoring should be undertaken; that support should be provided for basic environmental research; facilities for technological transfer; regular review of environmental standards and practices; rigorous implementation of the 'polluter pays' principle; etc. There is a clear convergence between the implications of both sacred and secular arguments.

Does the Christian point of view help or hinder environmental conservation? Certainly there are no grounds for agreeing with McHarg that Christianity is an inevitable environmental disaster. Indeed without the constraints of non-utilitarianism, it would be easier to justify self-interest, short-term solutions, parochial or 'not-in-my-backyard' considerations, and justification of extreme anthropocentric or naturalistic/preservationist situations. Christian doctrine provides a regulator for our environmental attitudes which can come from the application of strict common sense, but which are likely to be more consistent if based on underlying principle rather than mere pragmatism.

32 Edinburgh & Mann (1989).

33 The sixth annual bioethics conference of the Economic Summit Nations was held in Brussels in May 1989 on 'Environmental ethics: man's relationship with nature, interactions with science' (Bourdeau, Fansella & Teller, 1990). In his opening address, Delors called for an environmental code of practice, on the grounds that 'the values which have been accepted up to now by all industrial societies, whereby our natural habitat has become no more than a commodity, must be replaced by different values and a different approach to the environment'. The Brussels Conference set up a Working party to devise such a code, which was presented in May 1990 to a follow-up conference on science to the Brundtland Commission (Berry & Bourdeau, 1990; Berry, 1990).

Environment and Gospel

But there are other considerations affecting our environmental attitudes. In the middle of the Acts of the Apostles are three verses which record Paul's only address to those outside mainstream religious thought.³⁴ There are plenty of examples in the New Testament of sermons directed to educated Jews, to academics who suspect that there is a supernatural, or to believers with incomplete understanding. How does Paul challenge the sort of audience which will probably predominate during this coming week? You might think that he would take the opportunity to preach 'Christ and him crucified', the incarnation, or resurrection, or reconciliation, or the warmth of Church fellowship. He does none of these things. His message is simple, it is one of hope and of the good news of God at work; it is a straightforward plea to take the facts of human folly and the works of God in nature at their face value. Paul says,

'The good news we bring tells you to turn from your follies to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. In the past ages he has allowed all nations to go their own way; and yet he has not left you without some clue to his nature in the benefits he bestows; he sends you rain from heaven and the crops in their seasons, and gives you food in plenty and keeps you in good heart' (Acts 14:15-17).

In a world when we are increasingly having to question the regularity of the seasons or the trustworthiness of the rains, let us seize on the clue to God's nature that he has given us in the benefits we receive. Our world is not a chance collection of atoms, nor are we simply generalized higher apes. We live in a world created by God, and we are responsible to him for our treatment of it. Let us not apologize for the faith of our fathers. The God of Abraham, Elijah and David is the God of history, who is active today. Our ways are in his hands; he is the God of 1990 AD just as much as he was of 1990 BC and 990 AD.

On the gates of the old Cavendish Laboratory (Physics Department) in Cambridge is carved the text (Ps. 111:2),

³⁴ Stott (1990: 231) writes on this passage: 'Although what Luke includes is only a very brief extract of Paul's sermon, it is of great importance as his only recorded address to illiterate pagans. It invites comparison with his sermon to religious and educated Jews in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch, which is the only other one that Luke chronicles during the first missionary journey'.

In the same context of wondering and learning from the natural world, it is worth remembering also, that the Genesis creation narratives are in part at least, a theodicy.

'Great are the works of the Lord,
pondered over by all who delight in them'.³⁵

Let us ponder the works of the Lord, and let us use them as his own clues to his continuing work in the world. May they direct us to the Christ who has brought all things together, male and female, white and black, sacred and secular, and above all things, sinner with salvation.

35 Kidner (1975: 397) comments on this verse, 'Because the Lord's works are made "in wisdom" (Ps. 104:24) they repay research, as recent centuries of rigorous study have shown us abundantly. . . . But while this verse is well taken as God's charter for the scientist and the artist, verse 10 must be its partner, lest "professing to be wise" we become fools, like the men of Romans 1:18-23'. Verse 10 is

'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,
and they who live by it grow in understanding'.

It is worth recalling (although some will find this ironic) that the anthem composed by F. W. Bridge for Charles Darwin's funeral in Westminster Abbey was based on a similar proposition in Prov. 3:13, 14:

'Happy is he who has found wisdom,
he who has acquired understanding,
for wisdom is more profitable than silver,
and the gain she brings is better than gold'.

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