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Christianity and Environmental Duties

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Between 1993 and 1997, Irani was assistant professor in political science at the Lebanese American University in Beirut (Lebanon). While in Lebanon, he organized two international conferences funded by USIP. The first dealt with the issue of forgiveness and reconciliation in Lebanon and the second tackled the issue of the internally-displaced population in postwar Lebanon.



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Christianity and Environmental Duties

1. Introduction: Two Perspectives on the Value of Environment

The first Earth Day was celebrated on April 22nd, 1970, and this date is often considered the beginning of the modern environmental movement. The topic of environment has long been at the center of discussion in the variety of academic and political circles, but it has finally made its way into religious circles as well. In what follows, I would like to sketch the model for approaching the environmental problems from a Christian perspective.

We are all aware of the most pressing environmental problems such as Ozone depletion, global warming, trash disposal, air pollution in major cities, extinction of species. Some environmental damage, arguably, poses serious risk to human life in general, whereas other problems might simply diminish the quality of human life or diminish the variety and richness of human experience. In either case, there is little doubt that environmental issues cannot be simply ignored in our time.

There are two basic approaches to the question of why we should care about environment. The first approach can be characterized as anthropocentric, i.e., the one that places human good at the center of a value system. On this view, the condition of environment matters simply because it affects us, and we should care about the survival of various plant and animal species because they matter to us. The human-centered approach recognizes the value of nature preservation only to the extent it promotes general human welfare, but it does not place nature at the top of its priorities. We, humans, like our cars and the highways we drive them on, we need plastic bottles and air-conditioning, we require chemicals and fossil fuels. But acquiring all these goods of modern civilization is impossible without significant damage to the Earth we live on. At the end, the final outcome is often a compromise — between our desire for convenience and consumer goods, and the acceptable (from some abstract point of view) level of environmental damage.

The second major approach to environmental problems is more recent, and it tries to abandon the human-centered perspective as being inadequate to deal

with vast array of problems that face us, but rather to look at the issue from another point of view altogether. It starts with the basic assumption that nature, wilderness areas, and nonhuman life have their own inherent value, and therefore deserve moral consideration. Nature itself and individual natural objects have their own interests and goods, which cannot be captured by the usual cost-benefit analysis of the anthropocentric approach. It follows then, that we have to treat nature in accordance with an attitude of proper respect, regardless of whether such an attitude would maximize human benefits or not in any particular case or in the long run. We may refer to this view as an ecocentric perspective, as opposed to the anthropocentric one, mentioned earlier.

My concern in this paper is to show that a Christian attitude toward nature, although clearly anthropocentric in some sense, does not have to adopt the crude instrumentalist view on the value of the surrounding world, but may move to a more comprehensive and more acceptable model of the relationship between humans and nature.

2. Religion and Environmental Negligence

It is no secret that many critics of the human-centered approach to environmental issues blame the Judeo-Christian tradition for promoting the attitude unlimited consumerism and the general disregard for nature, that was so prominent in the western cultures. In particular, they single out the biblical mandate to subdue the earth and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and every living thing that moves upon the Earth (Genesis 1:28), as being responsible for this purely instrumentalist view of nature and all living beings.

In 1967, historian Lynn White published a book entitled *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis*. Himself a Christian, Lynn White concluded that many of our environmental problems could be traced to the Christian notion that God gave this earth to human race for their use and specifically directed humans to exercise dominion over Earth and all its life forms. Whether it was his intention or not, the book served as an indictment of Christianity as the source of our environmental problems, and rendered nonsensical the idea

that Christianity might have anything positive to contribute to our environmental crisis. As essayist Wendell Berry has observed recently: the culpability of Christianity in the destruction of the natural world and uselessness of Christianity in any effort to correct that destruction are now established clichés of the conservation movement. (1)

As an alternative, many have looked eastwards for a religious tradition that seemed to be more suitable for the concerns of modern environmentalists. Hinduism, Buddhism, Shinto, and especially Daoism have all been praised recently for their acute awareness of that fragile balance between human and non-human life forms, and their explicit concern for preservation of natural landscapes, animal species, and sources of water. On some interpretations, the Oriental approach to the outside world, even if it is couched in the specific terms of a particular religious tradition, is precisely what the West needs today to avert global environmental disaster. Speaking, for example, of the ecological advantages of Daoism, James Miller writes:

Daoism, as the indigenous religion of China, is profoundly ecological in its theoretical disposition. Daoism proposes a comprehensive and radical restructuring of the way in which we conceive of our relationship to nature and our cosmic environment. In such an understanding nature is not something outside of us to be dealt with after the fashion of a mechanic repairing a car, but is both a mental attitude to be carefully cultivated and the true condition of one's own body that contains the infinite dimensions of cosmic reality within itself. [...] As Daoism becomes more influential in the West it surely exerts a positive influence with respect to understanding what it means to be embedded in a cosmic ecology. (2)

It appears then, that the Judeo-Christian tradition fares badly by comparison with some Eastern worldviews, when it comes to questions of deep environmental awareness. The story of Genesis, that was quoted earlier, with its emphasis on the God-given dominion of man over Earth, used for centuries as the justification for the anthropocentric worldview, suggesting that humans can do whatever they please with regard to the environment. In addition, Christian theology focuses on the Future World, the Afterlife, the New Jerusalem, and holds a belief that the present Universe, our Earth included, will be destroyed at the End of Times. For example, James Watt, who became U.S.

Secretary of the Interior under Ronald Reagan in 1980-s, in his article *Ours Is the Earth* made it clear that he viewed the earth as merely a temporary way station on the road to eternal life. The earth was put here by the Lord for His people to subdue and use for profitable purposes on their way to the hereafter.

(3) Arguably, such an attitude, characteristic of many Christian groups, can hardly provide a sufficient incentive for preserving and carefully managing whatever natural treasures exist today.

In the last section of this paper, I would like to briefly suggest and defend two points. First, there is no need to deny that, historically speaking, a particular interpretation of Christianity in the West (combined with the powers of industrial revolution) is partly responsible for the present environmental crisis. But, secondly, and more importantly, I would like to challenge the established view that Christianity today has nothing to offer to the solution of environmental problems.

3. The Stewardship Model

In November of 1997 the Ecumenical patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church Bartholomew told a symposium on Religion, Science and Environment that drew an estimated 800 participants: To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin. (4) Patriarch Bartholomew's classification of intentional environmental damage under the rubric of sin was believed to be the first time a major international religious leader has explicitly linked environmental problems with sinful behavior. Such a stern judgment from a Christian religious leader of about 300 million Orthodox Christians stems from the idea that humans are not only given dominion over Earth, but are also entrusted by God with care for His creation, and thus bear special responsibility for the entrusted natural goods. If such a trust is abused as the result of excessive consumption, avarice and greed, God will hold us accountable. Patriarch Bartholomew continues in the same speech:

Consuming the fruits of the Earth unrestrained, we become consumed ourselves. Excessive consumption leaves us emptied, out of touch with our deeper self. Many human beings have come to behave as materialistic tyrants. But those that tyrannize the earth, are themselves, sadly, tyrannized. (5)

What the Orthodox Patriarch suggested, and what many other Christians embraced, was the Stewardship model of the relationship between humans and Earth. The model shifts emphasis from human rights and authority over the created order, to human duties to take good care of nature, which ultimately belongs to the Creator Himself. The human dominion over Earth, which is mentioned in the first book of the Bible, should not be interpreted as a human right to plunder and pillage at one's own pleasure, but rather, as a commandment to take good care of the earth and its creatures and resources. We are God's entrusted stewards, placed in a position of authority over God's property, but also warned against abusing our powers.

Both Old and New Testament affirm: The Earth is the Lord's, and everything in it. God speaks in the Bible, saying: Every animal of the forest is Mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are Mine. Not only does God own everything and know every creature, but He cares for and provides for the physical needs of His creatures. For example, Psalm 104 says that God provides water from the mountains for all the beasts of the field and the wild donkeys to quench their thirst. The same Psalm goes on to describe the trees of the Lord and the cedars of Lebanon that he planted. After listing a number of animal species, the psalm says that they all rely on God to give them their food at the proper time and that they are satisfied with good things. Psalm 104 indicates quite clearly that God cares for the earth and His multiple creatures.

If God Himself is described as caring for non-human life forms, then clearly Christians should have the same concern. The Bible declares God's pleasure in His creation, and the task of caring for and protecting the creation is given to us, humans. The Bible encourages wise stewardship of the earth, its resources, and its creatures. But at the same time it warns us against some of the extreme environmentalist positions, where the creation itself, rather than the creator, occupy the top place on the scale of values. This kind of misdirected loyalty by many modern environmental groups is clearly condemned in the Bible, since we are to worship God alone.

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