

# CREATION CARE AND THE CHRISTIAN

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**Critical issues concerning the environment are attracting more and more theological attention.**

**M**odern technologies have affected all life and the environment, creating new situations that require consideration. Moral deliberation, however, generally remains restricted to human life. Crucial questions need to be asked: Are humans part of the environment, or do they only conceptualize it? Are humans merely “in” nature, or are they truly “part of” nature?

Philosopher Holmes Rolston III addresses this point when he writes: “Environmental ethics stretches classical ethics to the breaking point.”<sup>21</sup> By

“classical ethics,” Rolston means systems of morality that apply only to humans. Classical moral theories do not address issues that go beyond human considerations.

But environmental ethics expands the circle of moral concern beyond human beings to include at the very least some “higher” mammals with whom we share important morally

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relevant characteristics. Environmental ethics explores why nonhuman life should count morally. By contrast, with rare exceptions, Western ethics is predominately anthropocentric, with moral value found primarily, if not exclusively, in humans.

For some ethicists, however, the anthropocentric perspective is sufficient to address environmental problems by emphasizing the importance of a clean, healthful, beautiful environment for human well-being. Although one has no responsibility for the environment in its own right, others can be harmed by damage humans cause to the environment. The natural world is not valued directly, for its own sake, but indirectly—for the sake of humans who find it valuable for the benefits it brings to them.

Other environmentalists have made concerted efforts to broaden the range of moral standing to include more species than human beings. Those concerned mainly with higher life forms are regarded as

“biocentrists.” Still others opt to justify the inclusion of plants and lower animals.

Peter Singer, author of *Animal Liberation*, extends moral concern to nonhumans through sentience. He asserts that many animal species besides humans possess a sentience that can suffer. This qualifies them for moral consideration. Two morally relevant aspects involve the reduction of suffering and the promotion of happiness. A sentient creature—whether it has fur, wings, or gills—deserves moral standing. Arguments that humans alone are morally privileged rest on arbitrary distinctions and are guilty of what Singer calls “specieism.”

Because sentient animals experience similar needs to those of humans, they must be given equal consideration. Actions that bring about suffering to nonhumans must be justified to the same degree as if those actions were directed toward humans. Pain is pain for both humans and nonhumans. Singer values

all sentient beings, excluding lower animals and plants. These species are presumed not to suffer, thus they have no moral standing. He primarily includes mammals as morally qualified sentient beings. However, the anthropomorphic bias remains.

In *The Case of Animal Rights*, Tom Regan argues that any living being that has a complex emotional and perceptual life, including pain and pleasure preferences, and the ability to pursue actions and goals with a significant degree of independence should be included within one’s moral scope. He maintains that many species of mammals fall into this category. These “subjects-of-a-life,” as Regan refers to them, have inherent value. Regan reaches the same conclusion as Singer that many mammals have equal worth with humans, albeit from an entirely different angle.

Singer and Regan are representatives of a limited biocentrism. They seek to extend moral consideration to nonhuman life within modified anthropocentric ethical systems. Other biocentrists applaud but fault them for failing to extend the range of moral standing any further. What about less-complex animals and the plant kingdom? Is moral standing possible for these? Must justification for their welfare and protection rely exclusively on their instrumental, economic, or aesthetic value?

In *Respect for Nature*, Paul Taylor

believes he has found a way to extend the circle of moral concern beyond sentience. He says that all animals and plants, sentient or not, conduct their lives in a clearly directed way. They grow and maintain themselves in terms of their own well-being. For example, a baby chick seeks to become a full-fledged representative of its species, as does a small maple sapling or a worm. There is nothing superfluous in the behavior of a living organism. Its very life is defined by and dedicated to its *telos*, even if it is not conscious of it.

Moreover, the *telos* of a species can be objectively described, unlike psychological capacity alone. One can know what harms or benefits an organism simply by witnessing its activities, even if the organism is not conscious of its nature or purpose. Teleological centers of life are valuable objectively apart from our assessment or judgment regarding them. Nor is the human *telos* superior to that of any other living thing. Each species has what is called “a good of its own,” giving it worth and value.

Taylor refers to this as “the biocentric outlook,” referring to interdependence and equality within this planet’s community. He expands the circle of moral concern, including greater numbers of nonhumans, going beyond the emphasis on consciousness or psychological awareness as the main qualification for

moral standing. Taylor is committed to the equality of living teleological systems, human and nonhuman. However, he doesn't address the value of waterways, mountains, or entire ecosystems, except as they provide a suitable environment for the flourishing of life.

A comprehensive environmental ethic would justify the inclusion of large communities of animals, plants, and geology, such as rivers, lakes, mountains, and valleys. These are referred to in environmental science as "biomes," "ecosystems," or more generally as "the natural environment." Ecosystems are loose associations of species, from subsoil microbes to the largest animals, that live together in countless numbers as citizens in a larger community. Aldo Leopold, a pioneer of environmental ethics, was an early advocate of ecocentrism. His 1949 essay "The Land Ethic," is the classic expression. Leopold advocates the extension of our human ethic to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively, "the land."<sup>2</sup> He uses the term *community* to describe the land as a highly organized whole, having its own integrity.

J. Baird Callicott, a disciple of Leopold, endorses this interdependence within an ecosystem by using the image of an organism: "Like organisms proper, ecosystems are complexly articulated wholes, with systemic integrity."<sup>3</sup> He does not

claim that ecosystems are alive but that they resemble living things closely enough to allow for valid comparisons. For example, organisms can be ill or well. The health of ecosystems may be assessed by diagnostic tests that resemble clinical examinations of animals and humans, including monitoring "vital signs" and identifying "risk factors."

Other environmentalists differentiate between "shallow ecology" and "deep ecology," claiming that living beings are constituted by relationships. Individuality is a minor aspect within a complex system of relationships. Reality is a universal river of energy. Individuals are merely minor disturbances in that flow.

Humans do not fare well in deep ecology, which proposes that all creatures and species are equal in intrinsic value. Radical ecocentrists argue that the individual is completely subordinated to the well-being of the ecosystem. The whole is of much greater value than any of its parts, even human parts.

### The Church and Ecology

Christian attitudes toward the environment are based on a distinctive understanding of the universe. The Earth has exalted standing because it was created by God and as such should receive respect. All of creation has value; even the nonliving environment is exalted in Scrip-

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ture. Ethicists outside the Christian tradition have often been unsuccessful in arguing for such high worth.

The ecological crisis has influenced some Christian scholars to pay more attention to creation. Threats to animals, birds, fish, the air, soil and ecosystems endanger not only human lives and community but also go against the directives of God Himself. The divine assignment of dominion and responsibility (Gen. 1:26) is a stewardship ethic. Thus, the obliteration of forests and wetlands, the pollution of waterways, and the extinction of numerous species of plants and animals should be a genuine concern.

Some Christian environmentalists have moved in this direction. James Nash defends the biotic rights of other species beyond humans, and their right to survive as a species even if that means limiting human exploitation of nature. Other stewardship models are motivated by

concern for future generations, manifesting varying degrees of intrinsic value for different species.

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Yet, ironically, Christians believe that God is Creator of this world and that He pronounced it "very good." Sermons are preached about stewardship, but generally focus on personal fiduciary responsibility and/or tithing, neglecting stewardship of the natural world. Of course, Christians, like all people, need reminders

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about careful management of money. But where is the counsel to be mindful of the Earth, the water, the air, and the animals? The consistent warning of many scientists is that our planet, with its many creatures and its many systems, is not healthy. Mounting evidence testifies that the material world God created is indeed “groaning” (Rom. 8:22, NIV).

#### **Old Testament**

The biblical perspective, beginning with the Book of Genesis and continuing to the end of the Book of Revelation, yields an impressive doctrine of ecology. Human is part of all life. Nowhere in Scripture is creation ever devalued. Biblical writers present an impressive link between ecology and theology.

Within the very opening chapters of Genesis (2:7, 19), we are instructed that the origin of both humans and animals is from the same dust. On the fifth day of Creation week, God pronounces a blessing on the new creatures of air and water. He commands them, as He does hu-

mans on day six, to “Be fruitful and multiply” (1:22, KJV). This implies at the very least, divine valuation of all these creatures. The results of the Fall, announced by God, also involve the Earth (3:14-19).

Later, Noah is told by God to take his family *and* animals into the ark “to keep the species alive on the face of all the earth” (7:3, NKJV). The turning point in the Flood narrative is seen to be Genesis 8:1—“Then God remembered Noah” (NKJV). The verse continues, however, with the conjunction “and,” reading: “God remembered Noah, *and* every living thing, and all the animals that were with him in the ark” (NKJV, italics supplied).

After the Flood, the animals are explicitly included in God's covenant with Noah: “God spoke to Noah and to his sons with him, saying: ‘And as for Me, behold, I establish My covenant with you and with your descendants after you, *and with every living creature that is with you: the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, of all that go out of the ark, every beast of the earth.* Thus I es-

tablish My covenant with you. . . . This is the sign of the covenant which I make between Me and you, and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I set My rainbow in the cloud, and *it shall be for the sign of the covenant between Me and the earth*” (9:8-13, NKJV, italics supplied).

Four times God links Noah with all the creatures in this covenant (9:9, 10, 12, 15, 17). Noah is also reminded three times of the animals that were with him in the ark. Later, God promises a similar covenant through Hosea: “‘In that day I will make a covenant for them With the beasts of the field, With the birds of the air, And with the creeping things of the ground. Bow and sword of battle I will shatter from the earth, To make them lie down safely. I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me In righteousness and justice, In lovingkindness and mercy; I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, And you shall know the Lord”’ (Hosea 2:18-20, NKJV).

Respect for animals is also implied in the Pentateuch through close ties linking human and animal life:

Both animals and human beings were created with the “breath of life” (Gen. 1:20, 24; 2:7, 19).

God blessed them both, and with the same blessing (Gen 1:22, 28).

Both humans and animals were

given a vegetarian diet (Gen.1:29, 30). As Charles Pinches and Jay B. McDaniel observe: “In the first story of creation, so often recited by Christians and Jews, animals and humans are treated together; both created on the sixth day, they are together given seeds, fruits and green plants to eat, not one another (Genesis 1:30).”<sup>4</sup>

Animals as well as humans have blood in their veins. That blood is a symbol of life (9:4-6).

They both could be responsible for murder (Gen. 9:5; Ex. 21:28-32).

They are both included in God's covenant (Gen. 9:9, 10).

Both are under the death penalty if they engage in bestiality (Lev. 20:15, 16).

Both animals and human beings are given Sabbath rest (Ex. 20:8-10; 23:10-12; Deut. 5:14).

Firstborn of humans and animals belong to God (Ex. 22:29, 30; 13:12, 13).

Priests and sacrificial animals have to be without spot or blemish (Lev. 21:17-21; 22:19-25).

Animals could not be sacrificed unless eight days old, and then they were to be dedicated to God. The same time period of eight days was given for a boy to be circumcised (Lev. 22:27; Ex. 22:30; Gen. 17:12).<sup>5</sup>

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lights in the firmaments of the heavens to the swarms of living creatures on land and in the waters, from plants and trees bearing fruit to all living land animals.

The description of God creating by His word indicates “not only the ease with which He accomplished His work, and of His omnipotence, but also of the fact that he works consciously and deliberately. Things do not emanate from him unconsciously, nor are they produced by a mere act of thought, as in some pantheistic systems, but by an act of will, of which the concrete word is the outward expression. Each stage of the creation is the realization of a deliberately formed purpose, the ‘word’ being the mediating principle of creation, the means of agency through which his will takes effect.”<sup>6</sup>

When God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind He recounts the wonders of the created world, urging Job to contemplate several wild creatures. God obviously values the animal kingdom in His longest speech in Scripture, a magnificent four-chapter address starting in chapter 38. He mentions animals such as a lioness, a mountain goat, a leaping horse, a hawk, an eagle, and a raven. Then God turns to the behemoth and the mighty leviathan and says of the leviathan: “The mere sight of him is overpowering. No one is fierce enough to rouse him. Who then is able to stand against me?”

(Job 41:9, 10, NIV). God exults in these members of the created world that will never be tamed by humans. Apparently these animals in the wild are prized in “the world as God sees it.”<sup>7</sup>

Balaam’s donkey, after being beaten, pleads for respect and fair treatment (Num. 22:27-30). The divine being, which Balaam does not at first see, also criticizes Balaam’s harshness toward the animal. The fact that “the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey” (vs. 28, NKJV) implies an intelligence already in existence now given the opportunity for expression.

As God leads the children of Israel to the Promised Land, He describes it as rich with “milk and honey” (Ex. 3:8; Lev. 20:24, NKJV). He also carefully instructs His people on good ecology.

Moses describes to the Israelites the glory of the land and God’s affection for it: “But the land which you cross over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water from the rain of heaven, a land for which the Lord your God cares” (Deut. 11:11, 12, NKJV).

In Deuteronomy the land is regarded as a divine gift, and it is celebrated in lavish terms! In Claus Westermann’s view, “No concept of history that excludes or ignores God’s activity in the world of nature can adequately reflect what occurs in the Old Testament between God and

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his people.”<sup>8</sup>

The Mosaic laws include protection of nature, even outlawing the destruction of fruit trees to aid a military campaign (Deut. 20:19). Animals were to be treated humanely. One must help another’s donkey when it has fallen under a heavy load, even if the animal belongs to an enemy (Ex. 23:4, 5; Deut. 22:1-4). Large work animals were not to be muzzled so they could eat while doing the heavy work involved in agriculture. They should be allowed to enjoy the harvest of the earth they are helping to reap (Deut. 25:4). The Hebrew people had an obligation to be kind to their animals.

The first-century Jewish historian Josephus mentions the Mosaic compassion for animals: “So thorough a lesson has he given us in gentleness and humanity that he does not overlook even the brute beasts, authorizing their use only in accordance with the Law, and forbidding all other

employment of them. Creatures which take refuge in our houses like suppliants we are forbidden to kill. He would not suffer us to take the parent birds with the young, and bade us even in an enemy’s country to spare and not to kill the beasts employed in labor. Thus, in every particular, he had an eye for mercy, using the laws I have mentioned to enforce the lesson.”<sup>9</sup>

The land along with humans and animals are included in the stipulations for the weekly Sabbath and the sabbatic year: “Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its produce, but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave, the beasts of the field may eat. In like manner you shall do with your vineyard and your olive grove. Six days you shall do your work, and on the seventh day you shall rest, that your ox and your donkey may rest, and the son of your female servant and the stranger may be re-

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freshed” (Ex. 23:10-12, NKJV).

When humanity accepts Sabbath rest, many others can rest. Norman Wirzba is sensitive to these Sabbath instructions: “Sabbath observance has the potential to release the depth and meaning of God’s many blessings at work within creation.”<sup>10</sup>

In their three annual festivals, Israel worshiped the God of grace as the Lord of nature. The Feast of the Passover, followed immediately by the Feast of Unleavened Bread, commemorated Israel’s redemption from Egypt. Taking place in the spring, usually during our month of April, the first sheaf of ripe barley could be gratefully waved before the Lord.

The second annual feast, the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost, also called the Feast of the Firstfruits or Harvest, was celebrated 50 days (or seven weeks) after Passover, around the beginning of June. It was thanksgiving time for the completed grain harvest of wheat and barley.

The last of these, the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles, was also known as the Feast of Ingathering. It

took place during our month of October, by which time the produce of vineyard and olive groves had been gathered.

The observance of these three annual festivals was divinely stipulated. God told Israel: “Three times a year you are to celebrate a festival to me. Celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread. . . . Celebrate the Feast of Harvest with the firstfruits of the crops you sow in your field. Celebrate the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in your crops from the field” (Ex. 23:14-16, NIV).

These feasts, of course, commemorated the signal mercies of the God of Israel who redeemed them from bondage, then provided for them during their wilderness wandering. Significantly, these three feasts also marked three different harvests. Israel was taught to honor Yahweh both as God of creation and as God of salvation. Both these themes were brought together in the instructions given Israel when they had come into the land of promise: “take some of the firstfruits of all that you pro-

duce from the soil of the land the Lord your God is giving you and put them in a basket . . . and say to the priest . . . , ‘I declare today to the Lord your God that I have come to the land the Lord swore to our forefathers to give us . . . , and now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, O Lord, have given me.’ . . . And you and the Levites and the aliens among you shall rejoice in all the good things the Lord your God has given to you and your household” (Deut. 26:1-11, NIV).

“Here was rich symbolism indeed,” according to John Stott. “The basket of fruit was a token of ‘all the good things’ which God had given Israel. It was the fruit of the ground, fruit which God had caused to grow. But from what ground? From ground which God had also given them, as he had sworn to their fathers. The fruit was a sacrament of both creation and redemption, for it was the fruit of the promised land.”<sup>11</sup>

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“When Israel told her story of the Exodus, the wilderness wandering, and the giving of the land, Yahweh’s delivering actions were not depicted

involving only historical actors and political events, but also with the use of the forces and elements of nature—in the plagues against the Egyptian oppressors, in the parting of the waters of the Red Sea, in the sending of the manna, quails, and water, in separating the waters of the Jordan, in making the sun and moon stand still for Joshua. Only the Creator-God, the One who made the sea, the animals, the heavenly bodies and all of nature, could employ these elements in his redemptive work.”<sup>12</sup> The Lord who works His will in the Exodus and manifests Himself with overwhelming glory at Mount Sinai is the very God who works majestically in nature and manifests His glory throughout all the Earth!

In the historical books, ecology and righteousness are linked: “the Lord appeared to Solomon by night, and said to him: ‘When I shut up heaven and there is no rain, or command the locusts to devour the land, or send pestilence among My people, if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and *heal their land*’” (2 Chron. 7:12-14, NKJV, italics supplied). Later, Israel indeed suffers a drought because of their apostasy (1 Kings 17). Further, the psalmists have not lost any wonder

over life and regularly extol the created orders. Even in the heavenly courts, the living creatures around the throne, while speaking day and night of God's holiness, also chant of the Creator's life-giving powers: "And one cried to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; *the whole earth is full of His glory!*" (Isa. 6:3, NKJV, italics supplied).

Within the Psalter, God's providence for His creation inspired many of the prayers and hymns. The psalmists emphasize how nature reveals the glory of God, and how all of God's creation is included in His care. Yahweh is described structuring the cosmos so that He may bless human life, but also that He might delight in His works: "May the glory of the Lord endure forever; May the Lord rejoice in His works" (Ps. 104:31, NKJV).

This divine rejoicing reflects God's attitude as He creates in Genesis. As S. R. Driver has observed, a note of divine satisfaction runs through all of Genesis 1, indicated by the repeated expression "And God saw that it was good." The formula marks each work, says Driver, "as one corresponding to the Divine intention, perfect as far as its nature required and permitted, complete, and the object of the Creator's approving regard and satisfaction."<sup>13</sup>

We are reminded in the Psalter more than once that God provides

sustenance for all life: "He gives to the beast its food, and to the young ravens that cry" (Ps. 147:9, NKJV). Psalm 104 surveys the whole world and chants: "O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures" (vs. 24, NRSV). The whole psalm displays God's pointed providence of the environment.

The psalmists repeatedly focus attention on the glorious manifestation of life in God's creation. In Psalm 148 an amazing array of non-human creatures along with the natural world are called to praise God: "Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command! Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds! Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! Young men and women alike, old and young together! Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven" (vss. 7-13, NRSV).

Though the psalmists apparently knew already, Paul Santmire correctly suggests that nature's praise of God is "one of the least understood themes in the Old Testament."<sup>14</sup> We tend to focus our study of God's working in salvation history and on human beings. Yet many biblical

writers record God's appreciation of the entire created order. According to the psalmist, our world is "highly charged with wonder and praise."<sup>15</sup> Thereby, our sinfulness can adversely affect the ability of the world of nature to voice its praise! Some have wondered if Christians should stop repeating the psalms about trees shouting to God for joy while so many forests are being cut down.

God is Lord of human beings and all life! Without nonhuman voices, God's praise is muted! No wonder that the psalmists were moved to compose glorious odes describing all creation praising God!

"Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord; for he is coming, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth" (Ps. 96:11-13, NRSV). □

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*This article is the first of two parts.*

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