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ADVANCING THE
CHRISTIAN TRADITION
IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

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Nobody reading the New Testament or any of the other Christian literature from the first two or three centuries could have accused the early Christians of painting too rosy a picture of what life would be like for those who follow Jesus. But the point is this: it is precisely when we are suffering that we can most confidently expect the Spirit to be with us.

N. T. WRIGHT

For Christians it's always a love game: God's love for the world calling out an answering love from us, enabling us to discover that God not only happens to love us (as though this was simply one aspect of his character) but that he is love itself.

N. T. WRIGHT

ANTIDOTE TO ARROGANCE: CHRISTIANS AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGE



PETER MOORE

I am back in the mountains of Colorado on a brief visit with good friends Tom and Joanie Francis. As their guest, I am attending a concert of the Bravo Festival in Vail, where the beautiful people escape from the summer heat of Houston, Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. The Rochester Symphony is taking us on a trip down memory lane, playing magical sounds from the great film scores of yesteryear composed by Max Steiner, Erich Korngold, Franz Waxman, John Williams, and Henry Mancini.

But a quiet war is going on behind the mellifluous strands of *Gone With the Wind*, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, and *ET*. It's the battle between developers and environmentalists. And, so far, with considerable difficulty, the developers seem to be winning.

A STRUGGLE

Dotted along the mountains from Vail to Aspen are gigantic glass and timber mansions perched precariously on the hillsides to give dramatic views of distant peaks. New hotels

and condominiums nestle into the sides of mountains, and lush golf courses appear on what was once semi-desert terrain. Stephen Carter, in his best selling novel *The Emperor of Ocean Park*, calls these "immense testaments to misspent wealth."

But this development has come with a struggle between the people who have made Colorado the vacationer's paradise it is and those who want to preserve its natural beauty for centuries to come. And the strange thing is that in the middle of this war is the Bible, or a particular view of the Bible, that environmentalists say has done irreparable harm to this earth, "our fragile island home."

According to the renowned environmentalist Roderick F. Nash, writing in a new book on Colorado, "Christianity played a central role in creating American environmental problems." This may come as a surprise to devoted Bible readers, but Nash comes up with chapter and verse. It is, of course, Genesis 1:28, where the Lord says, "Be fruitful and multiply, and subdue the earth" (KJV).

This, goes the argument, is an invitation to exploit our natural environment. Because of this verse, we in the West have been cursed with an anthropocentric approach to nature. We see the earth as here for our good—"Doggone it, don't tell me I can't dig up an old-growth forest I own if I want a house in the wilderness."

Nash is only repeating the recent environmental orthodoxy of writers like Lynn White, Jr. Back in the 1960s, a certain school of environmentalists traced our imperious attitude toward nature to the Bible.

It was the Bible, they claimed, that kicked off our habit of thinking dualistically about man and nature, and believing that nature existed only for humankind. They aimed to correct this arrogance by teaching us that rocks and toads have as much right to exist on this planet as we do and must be treated with respect and even devotion.

Do not misunderstand me. I am thankful that vast tracts of our wilderness have been protected. My journey this summer took me across the Continental Divide on Trail Ridge

Road in Rocky Mountain National Park, surely one of the most beautiful highways on earth, in places reaching for the clouds at over 12,000 feet.

I hiked along the pristine headwaters of the Colorado River, and, with my son, have explored several of the East's marvelous parks and mountain peaks. These have been precious times of thankfulness that vast sections of the majestic wilderness around us have been protected from developers, and really now belong to us.

THE ALTERNATIVES

Ah, there I go, talking about nature as if it existed just for our use. The real question is: Are these meadows and mountains there for us to use as we please?

Can we turn them into mansions, ski resorts, and golf courses if we want? Or into mills and factories? Or are the new environmentalists right? Are they sacred in themselves, places to revere because they have an inherent spiritual value quite apart from any human ability to appreciate it? Or is there a third alternative?

This is close to the old question: "If a tree falls in the woods, and there is nobody there to hear it, did it make a noise?" How central are we to the fundamental reality of the universe: Are we to "subdue the earth," or are we a fascinating but dangerous side show that must be contained, restrained, and coerced into releasing our tight and destructive grip on everything that we touch?

I confess that the sacralization of nature has a lot of appeal. People don't tend to find God on freeways. Strip mines are ugly. Skies and rivers shouldn't be filled with poisonous smog and sludge. And a world in which eighty million new people come on board our floating island each year—the equivalent of adding a new Denver every week!—is a frightening prospect that makes the life of a Trappist monk suddenly look surprisingly attractive.

But the secularization of nature is one of the great benefits of the Judeo-Christian heritage. Now, don't be spooked by

the word “secularization.” What it means here is that Christianity has taught us that nature isn’t divine. It has put nature in its rightful place in the scheme of creation. (But that does not, of course, mean that we can misuse it.)

Without it we still would be gently ushering mosquitoes outdoors out of a misplaced reverence for nature, as the great Alfred Schweitzer is said to have done in his jungle hospital in Africa. Without it we would be afraid to sink our teeth into a decent hamburger.

In fact, without it Rod Nash would not be able to indulge his love of deep powder skiing on the very Colorado heights he wants to protect, for the helicopters or lifts that take him way up to those heights use petroleum and electricity, and depend on technology. You get the picture.

The Bible’s secularizing agenda rescued science from the hands of philosophers and shamans and opened the door for the exploration of nature for its own sake. We have the Bible to thank for the birth of modern science. It was no coincidence that the discoveries of modern medicine and technology that we all take for granted emerged in a civilization that was willing to subdue the earth.

GETTING THE MEANING RIGHT

The modern environmental movement may, however, have a point. The Bible’s command to “be fruitful and multiply, and subdue the earth” has given those with a complete disregard for the limits of growth, and with a cavalier attitude toward nature, the justification they’ve wanted. People will always use religion to justify their intemperate desires, if they can get away with it—as the radical Islamic concept of Jihad illustrates.

But how anthropocentric should we be? Does the Bible really make human beings the center of the universe? Does it let us do anything we want to our natural environment as long as it suits our needs? When a dam is built that covers precious arable land so that a nearby city can keep its lights on all night, is this justified by God’s command to subdue the earth?

It would seem to me that the Bible is theocentric and that “the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof,” as the psalmist said. The Lord has not only put nature in its place, but he has put us in our place—and our place is to take care of his creation.

God’s command to “subdue” the earth comes with some important caveats. Man is not sovereign over nature, God is. Our role is that of a steward, not a master. Nature is not ours. Thus we can only exercise our dominion under God’s dominion.

We should remember that “subdue the earth” includes the idea of “tend the earth,” and some Bible paraphrases come close to saying that. “Tend” gives rise to visions of shepherds with their flocks and farmers with their plows. It breathes an air of concern and compassion rather than the rape and pillage that White and Nash have read into it.

But we have exercised this dominion very badly. It is one of the results of the fall that all relationships are corrupted: God and man, man and man, man and nature, nature and nature. As redeemed people, then, we have to reexamine our own attitudes toward the environment and recover the green dimension of our own Christian heritage.

GREEN CHRISTIANITY

As Jim Wallis put it in *The Soul of Politics*, “Environmental justice means the establishing of right relationships in the whole of creation.” There is nothing especially compatible with traditional Christian faith in a new SUV that gets eleven miles to the gallon!

Smog, chemical fertilizers, sewage, food additives, and hazardous waste are poisoning people. We need an environmental ethic that tells us how to subdue the earth in the way God intended and what this means for our lives today.

In *How To Rescue the Earth Without Worshiping Nature*, Tony Campolo points out that a proper attitude involves human transformation: “Those who would save the environment must themselves be saved. Those who would see a new

heaven and a new earth that is full of His beauty and glory must, themselves, be filled with His beauty and glory."

We may find ourselves as Christians in bed with some very strange fellows. As with so many critics of Western history, the radical environmentalists are often right in what they say is wrong, but wrong in what they say is right. It is clearly wrong to continue to desecrate this universe with the detritus of our wasteful appetites. But they are wrong to reject development and to treat nature as if it were divine.

To do him justice, Rod Nash does not reject all development. Although he rejects constructing houses (like his home in Crested Butte) all over the countryside, he is not, it turns out, a tree-hugging, back-to-nature nut. He sees nothing wrong, for instance, with computers, TV, and nuclear power.

But, I'd like to tell him, he does have a skewed view of the Bible. For it is the Bible that actually gives us the third alternative I mentioned earlier. In the Bible we learn that this incredible human experiment did not just happen by chance, as he unfortunately thinks it did, but was the purposeful plan of a Creator who is far more interested in the structure of a leaf or the flight of a sparrow than either he or I. You cannot base a solid environmental ethic on a cosmic accident.

A SOUND ETHIC

A sound environmental ethic will begin with the Bible story of creation. There we discover that humans are in some way responsible to care for everything around them. And this does not just mean the birds and the flowers, or the wild wilderness of mountains and rivers.

It also means urban life in all its complexity, for the same Bible that begins in a garden ends in a city. The New Jerusalem, according to the book of Revelation, has paved roads, the ultimate in sanitation facilities, bio-engineered fruits and vegetables, superb medical facilities—and, yes, even crystals that shimmer with the reflected glory of God.

In Genesis 1 we have in a nutshell the environmental ethic we need. In it God tells us to respect and nurture everything he

has made, and that we cannot do whatever we please with the earth. We ought to subdue and tend the earth, not because of some pantheistic worldview that confuses the creation with the Creator, but because he has given it to us as a gift, and because the whole universe bears the stamp of his amazing artistry.

AUTHOR

Peter C. Moore holds the BA from Yale, the MA from Oxford, and the MDiv from the Episcopal Theological School ('61). He completed the DMin at Fuller Seminary in 1989. He is the founder of FOCUS, the Fellowship Of Christians in Universities and Schools, where he currently serves as interim director, and served as rector of Little Trinity Anglican Church in downtown Toronto from 1986–96. He is the North American coordinator for the Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion (EFAC). Peter was Trinity's first chairman of the board, and has been on Trinity's board since it was founded. He is the author of several books, articles, booklets, and videos, including *Disarming the Secular Gods* (IVP), *One Lord, One Faith* (Nelson), *A Church To Believe In* (Latimer), and *Can A Bishop Be Wrong: Ten Scholars Challenge John Shelby Spong* (Morehouse). He and his wife, Sandra, live with their third child in Sewickley, Pennsylvania. Peter is a friend to John Armstrong and previously served as a contributing editor to *ACT 3 Review*.