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Responsibility for the Ecological Crisis

Richard T. Wright

The message is going out that humanity is in the midst of an environmental crisis of global proportions. Two processes appear to be out of control—population growth and technology. Millions of our race are malnourished and hungry, our urban areas are growing more dense and are reaching out like a cancer into the surrounding countryside, our air and water are fouled with by-products and wastes. We can hardly be thought of as living in harmony with our environment—one of the most obvious criteria for success as a biological species. We seem instead to be moving inexorably toward disaster, helpless to counter the destructive aspects of population and technology, apparently unwilling to bring these two processes under control. How did we get ourselves into this predicament?

A growing number of men whose writings attract wide interest have laid the blame for the ecological crisis squarely on Christianity. One of the most vocal spokesmen for this point of view is Ian McHarg of the department of landscape architecture, at the University of Pennsylvania. In his recent book, *Design with Nature*, McHarg (1969) states:

The great western religions born of monotheism have been the major source of our moral attitudes. It is from them that we have developed the preoccupation with the uniqueness of man, with justice and compassion. On the subject of man-nature, however, the Biblical creation story of the first chapter of Genesis, the source of the most generally accepted description of man's role and powers, not only fails to correspond to reality as we observe it, but in its insistence upon dominion and subjugation of nature, encourages the most exploitive and destructive instincts in man rather than those that are deferential and creative. Indeed, if one seeks license for those who would increase radioactivity, create canals and harbors

with atomic bombs, employ poisons without constraint, or give consent to the bulldozer mentality, there could be no better injunction than this text. Here can be found the sanction and injunction to conquer nature—the enemy, the threat to Jehovah” (p. 26).

The most widely quoted paper on this subject is “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis” by Lynn White, Jr. (1967). White makes a more scholarly presentation than McHarg but comes up with essentially the same indictment of Christianity. “Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt” (p. 1206). His conclusion is important:

Both our present science and our present technology are so tainted with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecologic crisis can be expected from them alone. Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not” (p. 1207).

From the number of times White's paper has been reprinted in various collected readings, and from conversations with colleagues, I perceive that many in science are quite willing to lay the burden of guilt for the environmental crisis on Christianity's door-step. As a Christian and an ecologist, I can only deplore this tendency, for I think that it widely misses the mark and may lead to serious consequences that would go counter to the basic goals of ecologists and conservationists.

Accuracy of the Indictment

There is no denying the biblical reference to man having dominion over the rest of nature. It first appears in the creation story: “and God said to them (man and woman), ‘be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’ ”

(Genesis 1:27,28). The injunction is repeated to Noah after the flood story and is recognized by David, writing in the 8th Psalm. However, this is not by any means the only reference to nature in the Bible. The Psalms are a rich source of nature texts, especially the following: 8, 19, 24, 29, 65, 95, 104, 147. The overall concept of nature as portrayed by the psalmists clearly goes well beyond Genesis 1:27 and 28. They point to a beautiful and awe-inspiring natural world which has value because it shows God's wisdom and power in its existence and functioning. Man, insignificant in stature and power in comparison with God and his creation, has dominated over the earth, but ownership clearly remains with God. In the light of these passages, it is difficult to understand White's reference to “the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man” (p. 1207). Commenting on this point in White's Article, Feenstra (1969) suggests:

Such a statement could result from a study of the behavior of “Christianized” peoples, but I would rather have White point to the disparity between behavior and the Biblical truth which should form the basis for the behavior of man. More helpful would be a reminder for all men that Christianity has something positive and constructive to say about the relationship of God, man and nature and that the gospel has implications of good news for nature as well as man.

In his most serious charge, McHarg claims that the Genesis 1:28 injunction to subdue the earth and have dominion over it is basically responsible for 20th-century man's exploitation and misuse of the environment because it encourages the wrong instincts in man. Yet, other historians cite the same text in a complimentary sense, asserting that the attitudes encouraged by this biblical teaching (among others) made possible the rise of science and technology in the Western world. As might be expected, many Christians are

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fond of this idea and point with pride to the accomplishments of science. White accepts this point of view and then drives his barb home by saying that if Christianity is going to get credit for modern science and technology, then it will have to take the burden of guilt for the misuse of the powers given to mankind by science and technology. I do not think the guilt can be panned off so easily.

I can accept the thesis that the Christian faith nurtured the rise of science and the experimental approach to the natural world, but in somewhat the same sense that parents give birth to and nurture a new individual. Continuing this analogy, just as a new individual develops his own personality, leaves his parents, and embarks on independent activities, science quickly established its own identity and sphere of activities directed toward understanding the natural world. That numerous scientists and theologians are continually attempting to reconcile science and Christian belief attests to the fact that both of these areas have long pursued independent courses. Present-day scientists would consider it absurd to attribute the basic credit for their activity and discoveries to Christianity. I submit that it is even more absurd to hold Christianity responsible for crises that have arisen from present-day applications of science just because several hundred years earlier science began within a Christian framework. Why not hold scientists responsible for their own activities?

Another aspect of the accusations of McHard and White involves something more basic than the rise of science—the attitude toward nature that sees it as something to be put to use, an object of technology. As White points out, technology has a much longer history than science, and the technological attitude has also been influenced by Judaeo-Christian belief. Perhaps the most essential role of this influence has been the withdrawal of the natural world from the realm of worship and, therefore, the removal of religious taboos and restrictions based on placating deities that reside in natural objects or natural areas. McHarg believes that the command to have dominion and subdue the earth has encouraged the exploitive activities of man, *implying that without this explicit command man would have behaved differently toward nature*. A fair test of this idea would be a major civilization which developed largely outside of the Western and Judaeo-Christian traditions and has a written history. Mainland China is an

excellent case in point. Tuan (1970) shows that the Chinese environment has fared very poorly even though Taoist and Buddhist traditions emphasizing man as part of nature were prevalent in China for many centuries. Commenting on this discrepancy, Tuan states (p. 244):

A culture's publicized ethos about its environment seldom covers more than a fraction of the total range of its attitudes and practices pertaining to that environment. In the play of forces that govern the world, esthetic and religious ideals rarely have a major role.

Other examples of the antiquity and universality of exploitation can be found in Thomas (1965) and are cited by Osborn (1948). Clearly, it is myopic to focus on exploitation and misuse of the earth by Western societies alone. The evidence indicates that there is a common denominator for exploitation that is independent of geography and religion.

The question also comes, why does the command to subdue and have dominion over the earth appear in the Biblical record? I would suggest that the purpose is the same as for the accompanying command to be fruitful and multiply—namely, to establish God as the author of some of the most basic biological and cultural capabilities of man. This is not the kind of command man can choose to obey if he wishes. There is no mention of punishment for disobedience, as in the detailed guidelines and prohibitions for human activities that appear in the Bible. Man will multiply and have dominion and subdue the earth because of the kind of creature he is. The later teachings on the value of nature, God's ultimate ownership, and man's responsibility to God indicate the stewardship role that best describes the way men should act toward their environment. However, as the Bible and the course of history illustrate so well, men have seldom lived up to their responsibilities in this or any other area.

Western man's utilitarian approach to nature in recent history is not, then, a testimony to the all-pervading influence of Christianity, a conscious effort on his part to please God. Rather, it is the result of the working out of potentialities of a species making use of its environment in the same sense that other species of animals, like the beaver, manipulate their environment. But this species is unmistakably flawed, for it seems to have the ability to turn its potentialities and activities either way—for good or for evil. And it has become abundantly evident

that technology is dangerous in the hands of this imperfect species, for evil enters when the technological impulse coupled with human carelessness and ignorance lead to environmental deterioration, when the use of nature coupled with human greed becomes irresponsible exploitation.

We have come to the well-spring of the ecological crisis. I suggest that there is no need to search the past to find the basis—the common denominator—for man's exploitation and misuse of nature. The explanation reveals itself every day, if we care to look for it, because it is present in each of us—human greed, carelessness, and ignorance. To solve the ecological crisis, we must come to grips with these very evident and very basic aspects of human nature.

The Strategy for Effective Action

Based on the foregoing considerations, at least two distinct strategies for corrective action can be plotted. The first might be called the "theological strategy," and it follows from White's conclusion that if the root of the problem is theological, the solution must be also. As if to lend substance to White's ideas, Christian theologians are beginning to work toward developing an environmental theology. In his book *Crisis in Eden*, Presbyterian minister Frederick Elder (1970) proposes a theological strategy for solving the ecological crisis. This involves emphasizing those areas of the Bible that support harmony between man and nature, and a renewed involvement with the principles of stewardship and responsibility as taught in the Scriptures. Elder calls for a new asceticism based on fundamental elements of restraint, an emphasis on quality existence, and reverence for life (p. 145). This strategy requires a major effort on the part of the churches and theologians. Most important, it implies that effective changes of attitude can be brought to large segments of our society through religious, ethical, and moral persuasion.

A second strategy, which could be called the "ecological strategy," appeals more directly to the realities of existence—namely, survival and the right to a clean, healthy environment. Here the message is ecological—e.g., the way natural systems function, man's influence on his environment, man as a part of nature and therefore dependent on other organisms. The medium is education: ecological thinking must pervade the entire educational gamut, from kindergarten through adult education. Newspapers, magazines,

and television must continually inform the public. This strategy permits a direct attack on exploitation and misuse of the environment. It is assumed that exploitation is caused by individual and institutional greed and, therefore, counteracting exploitation will involve arousing the exploited or the owners of that which is exploited. Misuse of the environment is countered by fostering an understanding of what the proper use is. The success of this approach is based on the assumption that if people really understand the basic principles of ecology and can clearly see what is happening to the quality of their life and environment and who is responsible for it, then they can be persuaded to help bring about corrective action. It is in their self-interest to do so.

In my opinion, the only strategy that holds any hope for success is the ecological one. It cuts across religious, sociological, and racial barriers to appeal to basic motives of self-interest. Even if the Christian churches were to agree upon the theological strategy, which is highly improbable, they lack the ability to influence the secular majority of our society. There may be a place for this strategy, however, in ministering to those who are still influenced by the churches and their teachings. The use of the theological strategy for this purpose does not imply that the charges of McHarg and White are accurate; only that for some, there is still a theological or spiritual dimension of life and, therefore, they can be influenced by approaching them on this level. It should only supplement, not replace, the ecological strategy.

The ecological strategy is already in action. People who are speaking out and becoming active in the public and political arenas relating to the ecological crisis are those who have become ecologically informed. Conservation has become a powerful force because it seems to more and more people that what the conservationists have been saying all along is right—it makes good sense; it is in their best interests as individuals and as part of society. The 1970's are being called the environmental decade. National attention is beginning to focus on the ecological crisis. And all of this has occurred without any evident impetus from religious or ethical sources.

In conclusion, I would say that to lay the blame for the ecological crisis on Christianity is to misread history. The great damage this accusation may do is not in discrediting Christianity—I think the Christian faith will survive the attack

—but in convincing some that the accusation is true, it puts the emphasis for action in the wrong arena. Christianity has become the scapegoat for human failure. It is not religious belief, but human greed and ignorance which have allowed our culture to come to the point of ecological crisis. The successful strategy must recognize these basic human faults and appeal to other basic human interests. This must be the ecological strategy, and it has the added advantage of calling for the involvement of all ecologically aware individuals and groups, not just those who are religiously inclined.

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