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Creation and Creative Stewardship Responsibility

In a recent book Edward O. Wilson, world-known biologist at Harvard, has invited the counsel and help of Christians (in particular Baptist) in a project he calls saving Creation. He readily admits that Christians share a different worldview from his own, but he thinks that need not divide Christians and secular humanists in working together on environmental issues. I happen to agree with Wilson, at least on the pragmatic side of things. He writes:

Let us see, then, if we can, and you [Southern Baptist ministers] are willing, to meet on the near side of metaphysics in order to deal with the real world we share. I put it this way because you have the power to help solve a great problem about which I care deeply. I hope you have the same concern. I suggest we set aside our differences in order to save the Creation.¹

One might want to qualify precisely the extent of “save”, but Wilson’s general working thesis and stirring appeal seems reasonable. I take seriously Wilson’s gracious invitation when he says, “I already know much of the religious argument on behalf of the Creation, and would like to learn more.”² What is offered here seeks to apply the logical extension of the doctrine of creation and how that might shape a response to the environmental challenges facing humanity. In this context, the word creation means all the material world which includes man who the Bible says is made in the image of God (Gen 1:26). Alistar McGrath notes: “a Christian doctrine of creation affirms precisely such a connection [human and divine conceptions of goodness and justice]. As I argued earlier, one of the implications of *imago Dei* is that there is a congruence between divine notions of truth, beauty, and goodness and proper human notions of the same through the

¹ Edward O. Wilson, *The Creation* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 4.

² *Ibid.*, 8.

creaturely status of humanity. A Christian doctrine of creation affirms a correspondence between the moral ordering of creation---including humanity as the height of that creation---and the mind of God.”³ Accordingly, this moral ordering to creation carries with it a strong notion of human responsibility in relation to creation.

The logical implications of a Christian concept of creation insert the philosophical/theological element into environmental stewardship. This element, as McGrath points out, is that there is moral dimension of creation requiring human beings to respond in a moral way to the environment. In light of this, this essay, examines transcendent principles that inform any discussion of environment stewardship. This means that environmental stewardship is first motivated by the moral element independent of any claims of crisis. The purpose of this essay is not to critique what is or is not being done in environmental stewardship, but to underscore the importance the moral dimension of creation within the Christian tradition in any discussion of environmental stewardship---that is it is first a moral matter. It should be pointed out that such a view of creation does not mean that this is instantiated by Christian practice. However, on the other hand, this view of creation rebukes the claim that Christian teaching is actually anti-environmental care.

The idea of creation as used herewith is the notion that creation entails a creator and that that creator has commanded humankind with the responsibility of care for creation. Although Wilson may be thinking about what the Christian and the secular humanist might *do* together to forward environmental stewardship, the point here is to examine the logic of the metaphysics entailed in the notion of creation which serves as the Christian motivation for creation stewardship.

³ Alister McGrath, *The Science of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004) 66.

This is important on two levels. The first is because it explains why Christians should be concerned about the state of the environment and their God-given responsibility as stewards of creation. The second explains how the concept of creation itself informs philosophically on issues related to environmental stewardship. The concept of creation in the Christian sense both explicitly and tacitly gives good and sufficient reason for stewardship of the environment, which includes (1) our attitude about ourselves and responsibility to our environment which includes other beings; (2) how we control and apply the technologies science manufactures using the elements of creation. On the first point, Jesus claimed that loving one's neighbor is second and like loving God, yet many think of themselves as the exception and act with disregard for their neighbor. On the second point the assumption that whatever advances our comfort and enjoyment must never be questioned in terms of the integrity of the environment must be reviewed.

Speaking of nature as creation, as Wilson does, is of considerable significance. As already noted, creation is not a neutral term, as it comes with certain philosophical entailments. Creation is that which is created and, by definition, requires an intelligent creator. No attempt is being made for the position known as Intelligent Design, but only to point out that the word "creation" necessarily carries with it the idea of someone creating which implies design which in turn implies intelligence. In Christian terms, the Creator is God, who is an intelligent, moral being. If God is responsible for nature, then that has profound implications for how nature is viewed, not just by Christians, but by all humanity. This, however, is not an attempt to argue for a religious claim of personal commitment,⁴ but rather an ontological one – the nature of reality.

⁴ By this I mean that I am making no appeal here for some personal commitment to the Christian God, only that if God is there and is the creator of the universe, then reality is one way and not another.

It is a claim about the nature of reality (creation) which carries with it rather significant implications.

In the Christian understanding creation and Creator are not the same thing.⁵ In addition, the concept of nature (another way of speaking of creation) includes man. Man is created by God as a rational, moral being and as such is morally responsible to the Creator, according to Christian tradition. This is important when considering environmental stewardship. As a moral being he can make judgments between right and wrong, good and bad as guided by transcendent moral principles and therefore is responsible to the One who established the moral principles. Because of this man is first responsible to God in an individual sense and responsible to God for what he does with creation itself, as God has given man stewardship over creation (Gen 1:28, 2:15). This responsibility is not merely for religious people, but all people as all humanity is made in the image of God. The argument here is that this is foundational to the environmental issues facing man at any point in history. The matter of responsibility goes to the very heart of creation stewardship. Whereas much of environmental degradation is caused by man acting in his own self interest, the entailment of responsibility bound to the concept of creation places responsibility to God over personal and corporate self-interest.

The Christian creation viewpoint calls man to a responsibility that is higher than himself, instead of the radical self-interest witnessed in so much of human behavior today. While a person may take care of his private space (undoubtedly because it is in his self-interest to do so), he more often than not is rather indifferent to his responsibility to God or others when it comes to space or resources held in common. That is, space and/or resources that are public, which is to say they belong to no one person or group of persons---examples being air and water. However,

⁵ Because of the Christian view of creation, Christians do not worship creation, which means their care for the environment is not motivated by granting some *godness* to creation, but rather because God has given man the responsibility of caring for creation (Gen 1:28; 2:15).

when the concept of creation is consistently applied one recognizes that all space and resources, whether held in private or common, calls for responsible stewardship. There is even a practical side to this stewardship which is the fact that our environment is essential to the survival of humanity.⁶

Consider the fact that when it comes to public space (the commons) our sense of self-interest controls much of what we do. Obviously, it is not true of every person, but it does seem to be the rule whether we are talking about water resources or the public park. Self-interest sponsors behavior that both endangers space and/or resources and subsequently harms not just the environment, but other beings as well.

The first concern of creation stewardship speaks to the matter of self-interest with respect to the use of nature. This phenomenon of destructive behavior, both environmentally and socially has been addressed by Gannett Hardin. He called this development “the tragedy of the commons” which helps highlight how self-interest is destructive to the environment and to others in any sense of community. Hardin explained this concept in the following way:

Picture a pasture open to all. It is to be expected that each herdsman will try to keep as many cattle as possible on the commons. As a rational being, each herdsman seeks to maximize his gain. Explicitly or implicitly, more or less consciously, he asks, “What is the utility *to me* of adding one more animal to my herd?” This utility has one negative and one positive component.

1) The positive component is a function of the increment of one animal. Since the herdsman receives all the proceeds from the sale of the additional animal, the positive utility is nearly +1.

2) The negative component is a function of the additional overgrazing created by one more animal. Since, however, the effects of overgrazing are shared by all the herdsmen, the negative utility for any particular decision-making herdsman is only a fraction of -1.

⁶ It is interesting that in the Genesis account of creation (the first chapter), after God tells man to have dominion (v 28), the next verse says that earth is what gives man sustenance. This means that it is to man’s benefit, as well as for his survival to take care of the nature since his physical life is maintained by what the earth produces.

Adding together the component partial utilities, the rational herdsman concludes that the only sensible course for him to pursue is to add another animal to his herd and another; and another But this is the conclusion reached by each and every rational herdsman sharing a commons. Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit---in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons.⁷

Certainly, self-interest either by the individual or corporations does not account for all the degradation of the environment, but it does account for a large part of it. This self-interest can be in the form of profits, convenience, or general greed. Examples of this are so evident and plentiful it is not necessary to cite any.

The tragedy of the commons reveals a particular stream of the self-interest and its destructive consequences on the environment, but it is not the only way in which self-interest leads to degradation of the environment. The destructive forces of self-interest are at work in other ways as well. One of the most obvious ways is where legitimate activity is conducted, but where environmental impact is ignored in order to increase profits of the operation. While technology may be available to mitigate the negative impact on the environment and human beings, it is not applied due to the fact of cost which cuts into the profit margin. It may not be only a matter of economic competition that drives such behavior but pure greed --- to make as much money as possible with total disregard for the environment or human beings.

Notice how Christianity's view of creation counters this. If all that is, including man is created by God, then it all belongs to Him. Man is only the vassal who has been given the responsibility of caring for creation. Therefore, it matters not whether a small piece of creation belongs to me personally (or to a corporation) or is open for all; it is all God's creation and the

⁷ Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons", *Science*, (Vol 162, Dec 13, 1968), 1243-1248.

responsibility is the same---be a good steward in God's stead.⁸ In this case, self-interest gives way to a higher responsibility, that to God the creator.

In addition, if all are members of the human race, then all share a common responsibility to each other. That is, each is created (according to the book of Genesis) in the *image of God*, as is a neighbor. In this sense, each person belongs to God which means in Christian thought the idea of not only looking out for one's own interest, but for the interest of others. We are commanded to love God which we do when we obey Him, but we are also commanded to love our neighbor as ourself (Matt 23:37). Neighbor love means that I consider the interests of others in the pursuit of my own dreams and desires---there must be a balance. This view comes also from St. Paul's admonition in his letter to the Philippians. "He writes: Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind, let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for your own interests, but also for the interests of others" (Phil 2:3-4). Practically, all know that the lack of moral self-restraint of the few results in difficulty for all. While we may need something like a tax on pollution or stiffer laws for violators, in the end, what is really needed is an active moral compass within each individual encouraging the responsible use of nature. A Christian understanding of creation provides the grounding for such morality.

The second concern of creation stewardship relates to the matter of how man controls and applies technologies he manufactures from what is. I will call this *creative stewardship*. Man is not called only to care for creation as he finds it; he is also to be a good steward as he develops, investigates, enjoys and enlarges creation (creative stewardship). Yet, here again, man is always to realize creative stewardship must be done with an acute awareness that creation ultimately

⁸ Using this language of vassal and steward, I am not suggesting that God is not involved daily in His creation. I am speaking only of man's responsibility, not God's personal activity in His creation.

belongs to God. This view of nature (creation) should shape the assumptions held about what is permissible as creative stewardship is exercised.

The work of science⁹ using nature can be very beneficial to mankind. It does not follow, however, that everything that is done yields a net benefit. That is, a net benefit either in terms of the number of people it benefits or in the opportunity cost compared to the benefits accrued to certain groups within humanity. The general assumption often motivating this aspect of science, however, is that what can be done, should be done. The unchallenged idea is that any change is an improvement and that it constitutes progress and, furthermore, that progress is always good thing. Little attention has been given to the possible overall negative impact on the environment or on humanity itself. That is not to say it should not have been done, but rather had it been done with a little forethought or restraint it might have averted the negative effects. It is not an either/or proposition, but the fact remains human beings have not always acted responsibly (creative stewardship) in the application of creative science.

Whenever one looks at what can be done, the question to be asked is what problem is it solving, and if there is a negative impact in degradation of the environment or humanity, how that might be mitigated. Neil Postman argues we must always ask *why* we are doing this or that. Without asking this question, Postman says: “We learned *how* to invent things, and the question of *why* receded in importance. The idea that if something could be done, it should be done, was born in the nineteenth century.”¹⁰ He continues: “But let us say that we have found a technological solution to a problem that most people do have, that we have some notion of who will pay for it, and that we are aware of those who might possibly be harmed. And let us suppose further that there is a will and even an enthusiasm to move ahead with the project and to speak

⁹ Some science merely investigates and observes nature while other aspects of science actually enhance the usefulness of science for humanity. It is the latter idea of science for which Francis Bacon is remembered.

¹⁰ Neil Postman, *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century* (New York, Vantage Books, 1999), 39.

favorably of its prospects. We have, then, the following question to ask: What new problems might be created because we have solved this problem?”¹¹ Certainly Postman has pointed to a much neglected question and, in the end, it is the question of human responsibility. If we want to make a difference in the future of the environment, the issue of humans behaving responsibly in how they apply what can be done to the situations of life must be addressed.

I am not a Luddite. I am grateful for much that technology has brought to humanity, but the point is that the assumption that everything that can be done should be done rules much of the thinking today. Furthermore, with the advancement of the new possibility the prevailing assumption is that there are no negative consequences to humanity---only benefits. So, while science brings so many good things to life the use of it has often brought degradation to the environment because so often responsible questions are not addressed. Too often there has been a total avoidance of the question about how a new technology will impact humanity itself.

The notion of progress is an interesting one that has definite roots in the thinking of Francis Bacon (a subject to which I will return shortly). At least in the western world (and now I fear around the globe) progress has become an end in itself. This is a concern Bury raised at the beginning of the 20th Century. He writes: “We now take it [progress] so much for granted, we are so conscious of constantly progressing in knowledge, arts, organizing capacity, utilities of all sorts, that it is easy to look upon Progress as an aim, like liberty or world-federation, which it only depends upon our own efforts and good-will to achieve.”¹² Bury quite correctly points out the mistaken assumption that all progress is good for humanity when he notes: “In short, it cannot be proved that the unknown destination towards which man is advancing is desirable. The movement may be Progress, or it may be in an undesirable direction and therefore not

¹¹ Ibid., 48.

¹² J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into its Origin and Growth*, Introduction, (Reprint from 1920, Gloucester, UK: Dodo Press, 2008). i

progress.”¹³ What Bury suggests, at least, should give us pause as we find ourselves often recklessly abusing the planet earth all in the name of progress. That is not to say all scientific pursuits should be stopped until all possibly contingencies are fully fleshed out, only that the assumption that if it can be done it should be done is an assumption that must come under tougher scrutiny. When progress is an end in itself, the idea of responsibility to the environment and humanity too often loses its place in the discussion.

Francis Bacon did put science on a new track which has resulted in, as Bacon envisioned, man gaining dominion over nature. Bacon, however, is clear that the advancement must always be accompanied with a sense of human responsibility. When speaking of his new scientific method, Bacon asserted: “And from this [his scientific method] an improvement of the estate of man is sure to follow, and an enlargement of his power over Nature. For man by the Fall fell both from his state of innocence and his dominion over creation. Both of these, however can even in this life be to some extent made good; the former by religion and faith, the latter by arts and science.”¹⁴ Bacon pointed out, “Let the human race only recover its God-given right over Nature, and be given the necessary power; then right reason and sound religion will govern the exercise of it.”¹⁵ He knew that the moral and ethical ingredient guiding progress and, that from Christianity was essential to his vision for science. The fact is, Bacon had a tremendous influence on the influence of the ascendancy of science which in turned shaped much of the decades to come. In fact, Wilson thinks Bacon was the architect of the Enlightenment. He notes: “Among the Enlightenment founders, his spirit is the one that most endures. It informs us across

¹³ Ibid., ii.

¹⁴ Francis Bacon, translated and edited by Peter Urbach and John Gibson, *Novum Organum with other Parts of the Great Instauration*, (Chicago: Open Court, 1994), 52.

¹⁵Ibid., 131.

four centuries that we must understand nature, both around us and within ourselves, in order to set humanity on the course of self-improvement”¹⁶

In further support of this view, one only needs to read the *New Atlantis*. The *New Atlantis*, published after Bacon’s death, reveals how he viewed the relationship between the fruits of science and Christianity. In this short story, he has the voice of science saying, “*Wee haue certaine Hymnes and Seruices, which wee say dayly, of Laud and Thanks to GOD, for his Marueillous Works: And Formes of Prayers, imploring his Aide and Blessing, for the Illumination of our Labours, and the Turning of them into Good and Holy Vses.*”¹⁷ Science was not free to do just anything possible and in all things it was to consider how it related to God and his creation. In fact, one should not do science for science sake. Bacon thought that in doing science: “*Neither doe we this by Chance, but wee know beforehand, of what Matter and Commixture, what Kinde of those Creatures will arise.*”¹⁸ If Bacon is so important to modern science, maybe it is unwise to jettison his concern that science be guided by right reason and Christianity.

I have endeavored to show here is that the Christian view of creation provides an important notion for investing both creation and creative stewardship with a much needed moral dimension. I agree with Wilson when he suggests that Christians and the secular humanist have a common interest in creation care and should join one another in caring for creation. I agree, Christians should have an interest in the practice of creation stewardship if they are consistent with their view that nature is God’s creation. However, the Christian has something important to contribute to the larger discussion of *why* we should care for creation. It is what I have tried to

¹⁶ Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1998), 23.

¹⁷ Francis Bacon, edited with introduction and notes by Alfred B. Gough, M.A., PhD, *New Atlantis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1915), 47.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

argue as an entailment of the doctrine of creation, namely human responsibility. In this case, the matter of stewardship of creation is something much larger than developing technology to fix what has gone wrong or creating laws to force humanity to change its ways. For the Christian, environmental stewardship begins with the notion of personal responsibility to God for caring for His creation and is augmented by the command to love our neighbor. The idea is that humans are stewards of God's creation by God's mandate and as such are responsible to God for how creation is used. This means self-interest and irresponsible use are contrary to the idea of Christian environmental stewardship. It is the violation of this that has led to much of the degradation of the environment, as people act in self-interest, ignoring their responsibility not only to one another but ultimately to God.

The moral dimension of creation gives a much stronger and firmer grounding for creative and creation stewardship. The fact of responsibility to care for creation is stronger than arguing on the basis of our responsibility to future generations as it avoids the debate that non-existents have no rights. It also avoids making a crisis the grounds for environmental stewardship since not everybody (including many good scientists) think, for example, that there is a crisis of man-made global warming. Besides, creation stewardship prevails whether there is an environmental crisis or not.

While it is true that we can work to the same end as the secular humanists, the fact is, what is required for sustainable creation stewardship goes beyond human effort, laws, and technology; it really does go to a shift in worldview thinking. Creation is an overarching idea, a metanarrative if you please. It transcends particular generations and particular crises. It signals that all of creation belongs to God and humans are His stewards. So it places the idea of responsibility, not to self or to coming generations, but to God and also neighbor. I think if we

are all honest with ourselves we would agree that unrestrained self-interest and individual and corporate irresponsibility (the tragedy of the commons) have contributed much to the degradation of our environment. My suggestion is that we work together to fix what has been damaged to the degree we can while simultaneously beginning serious dialogue on how to curb environmentally destructive behavior. Until we address the more basic or fundamental issue of human behavior as a moral event, environmental stability will only be a dream frustrated by one misstep after another.