

OPENING STATEMENT: TRUTH AND ATHEISTIC WORLDVIEW: LET THEISTS AND ATHEISTS

UNITE TO SAVE NATURE, GOD'S CREATION

Robert Y. George (Scientist-'Mere Christian'), Bruce A. Little (Theologian-Philosopher)

and Michael Bazemore (Atheist-Historian)

Provost Bruce R. Ashford (Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary) in his opening appeal given as the first piece in the current issue of *'Theoecology Journal'* brings in the wisdom of a great Scholar Dr. David K. Clark, author of the 2003 book "To know God and Love." This book thereby "provides a venue for scientists, philosophers (theists and atheists alike) and theologians partnering together asking questions that seek 'reality'." Provost Ashford offers intellectually a challenge, defining "reality" that is no different from 'truth' that we three (scientist-believer, atheists and theologian) address in this joint article with a goal of erecting a platform to save life on earth.

Recently Alder-Plenatarium astronomer Grace Wolf-Chase, in the May issue of 'Clergy Letter', reported that the stars that light up the famous "Orion Nebula" are 10,000 times brighter than our Sun. This is really mind-boggling for both scientists and non-scientists alike. Astronomers such as Neil Tyson have also concluded that our solar system orbits the center of our Galaxy once in 230 million years, the so-called 'galactic year'. Such is the awesome reality or truth of our universe which theologians and scientist-believers attribute to the wonder of God's Creation.

Tom Rowley heads the *A-Rocha-USA* that is devoted to 'Creation Care missionary works' all over the world in 19 countries thus far. According to Rowley, we find answer and promise from the

words of Gus Speth, the former dean of the school of Forestry and Environment at Yale University: "In 30 years of good science we have realized that the 'real problem' is not the lack of scientific skill and expertise but rather the human greed, ego and apathy. He recommends not a scientific approach to solve the 'real problem' but a spiritual and cultural transformation and in our opinion, this pursuit for truth is really the ripples originating from "Theoecology."

Theoecology, by its very title, entangles two fields of study, fields which have often been seen as distinct. Theology and ecology come together under this heading, with the express intent of "bridging the widening gap between science and Christianity." Though our statement of purpose suggests a gathering of Christian scientists, we seek a broader remit, and so also attempt to engage those of other faiths, or of no faith at all, in our common search for truth—truth about the state of our planet and of the life on it, and of how we might care for this world we all inhabit. [The writings of C.S. Lewis provides ample evidence that confluence of Christian denominations is feasible in the "Mere Christian Approach" on the basis of the statement of Jesus Christ: "I am the way, truth and life."](#)

In the beginning of the modern sciences, truth was one. From antiquity forward there had been present in the Christian intellectual tradition an understanding that God had created the universe and he had given mankind two tools to understand it—the Bible, and the intellectual faculty of reason. Reason was to be used in reading the Bible, but also in ferreting out the workings of the universe. The universe was a theophany, and one believed to be intelligible to mankind. When Copernicus began gazing at the heavens, when William Harvey worked out the functioning of the human heart, when Margaret Cavendish expounded her natural philosophy, when Isaac Newton calculated the force of gravity, each understood himself (or herself) to be

interpreting the works of God. They were reading, as it were, the Book of Nature, which revealed God as surely as the Scriptures.

As our understanding of the material universe increased, it became possible to think of it anew. Some thinkers saw no scope of action within the universe for a creator, and suggested one who set the initial conditions of existence and then left it to run. Still others saw no need of a creator at all. Most, however, worked to harmonize their burgeoning understanding of the cosmos and their religious beliefs. It is telling in this vein that Isaac Newton, whose work did so much to advance a mechanistic understanding of the universe, wrote more on the topic of religion than on all other subjects combined; he was a devout, if heterodox, Christian.

Among professional scientists the balance has tilted in favor of those with little or no belief at all, but these are still the divisions. Truth is plural. There are the empirical truths, those that can be tested by experiment and confirmed by more experiment. These are objective; they do not vary from observer to observer. Then there are more personal truths, the truths of religious faith, and of personal philosophy. These exist outside of the realm of science and, so, while they might offer a source of moral authority and inform explorations of the natural world, they have no probative value. They help us, however, make value judgments about the truths revealed by science and about the actions we might undertake in response to them.

Is empirical truth the "Commons" on which we can meet? It seems not, since empirical truth is descriptive rather than prescriptive. We must, therefore, find a common moral ground on which to meet as well, which is even more difficult since moral truth cannot be tested in a laboratory. Or, rather, the laboratory in which they are tested is the world itself, and the consequences affect real people. We at *Theoecology* come to you today to share our views of

the world—a Baptist philosopher, a Lutheran biologist, an atheistic historian—to try and map out the bounds of this metaphorical common ground on which we might meet to address the very literal common ground we share. It is hoped that this exchange of worldviews, not intended to be comprehensive, can facilitate cooperation across boundaries that might otherwise keep us apart.

There is the world and nothing else. This is the starting point as I think about the world as it exists without gods. As I sit, as I type these words, I am aware that I exist in an interval between non-existence and non-existence and I want this period to be as useful and pain-free as possible. Call me an atheist if you wish; the word certainly describes part of who I am. But only a part. My worldview is something more. Atheism, however, answers only one question, whether I believe in a God or gods. Beyond that, it offers nothing else. It is the opposite, not of Christianity (or Judaism, or Islam, or Hinduism, etc.). It is the opposite of theism. So, in a sense, there is no atheist worldview anymore than there is a theist worldview. Here I will offer an atheistic worldview, one beginning with the above statement that there is the world and nothing else.

For the purposes of our endeavor at *Theoecology*, we suppose it best to start with ways of knowing. We accept that, for knowledge of the natural world, science provides a window through which we might peer at the workings of nature. What is this view as we understand it? It is of a universe that operates according to natural rules that are intelligible to us. Where we lack explanations (for instance, in our understanding of the Planck Time), we must not simply throw up our hands and surrender; we must, rather, redouble our efforts at discovery, confident that explanations are available. Evidence and reason are our best tools in this search. In the opinion

of one of the authors of this article (atheist), this is not an outright denial of the supernatural, or of the existence of God or gods. Moral conclusions are the area that is most fraught, though it need not be so. Like most humans, I learned morality from my parents and from the society around me. As an American, and as someone whose parents were, at least nominally, Christian, this means that at some level my morality was influenced by Christianity. Since Bazemore has abandoned the Christian faith, indeed all faiths, he must then premise his morality on something other than divine revelation.

This is not an issue. Morality is a universal phenomenon. Bazemore believes that all people have the same mores, but that all people have developed a set of rules that help govern their behavior. Though some of these are tied to religion, morality itself predates religions, it is not historically constructed in the same way they are. Darwin seems to have recognized this when he wrote that “[n]o tribe could hold together if murder, robbery, treachery, & c., were common; consequently such crimes within the tribe are ‘branded with everlasting infamy.’”¹ Indeed, if there is a first principle of morality, it seems to be some version of the Golden Rule, permutations of which are to be found worldwide. The reason for this ubiquity is simple and, again, provided by Darwin: empathy for others allows us to put ourselves in someone else's shoes, to feel, as it were, what they feel.² From this, and from the success of societies where empathy-based morality has been practiced, we can infer that behaving in this fashion is good not only for individuals, but for societies. So I can feel for my fellow human (though the process

¹ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* in E.O. Wilson, ed., *From so Simple a Beginning: The Four Great Books of Charles Darwin* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006), 830.

² Ibid., 830-832.

by which humanity might fall under the aegis of my morality is long and worthy of a discussion for which we have no place) without being enjoined to by any supernatural agents.

As to the existence of such supernatural agents, Bazemore responds only with agnosticism. If science is sufficient means to explain processes since the inception of this universe, there is no such agents *within* it. This is adequate basis for a position of atheism. Where does this leave us in our search for common ground? Precisely where we are now—on this world we share. We have now, we have this life, we have this world. We have a shared heritage of empathy-based morality. We have a shared interest in the endurance of the natural world for our progeny.

Recently Pope Francis called fellow Catholics to become “Custodians of Creation” because he was convinced, while witnessing natural disasters like earth quakes, volcanic eruptions, frequent hurricanes and super storms, caused by exponential increase in carbon dioxide emissions, largely of human origin, thus driving the ongoing climate change. Pope Francis’s answer was simple: “We must safeguard Creation. If we destroy creation, creation will destroy us.” Harvard evolutionary biologist Stephen J. Gould appealed in his books and speeches that theologians and scientists must not work together but they must choose their separate paths.

Unfortunately, his appeal fell in deaf years and now we see more and more dialogues between scientists and theologians, as we seek the truth.

When we seek truth, it is no good if we just indulge in rhetoric and mere preaching without action. Therefore in 2012 we organized a faith-based symposium to find answers to the pollution problem in Falls Lake that provides drinking water to half a million citizens living in the triangle area in North Carolina. We brought under the roof a church in Wake Forest, seven

theologians and seven ecologists. The proceedings of this symposium was published in *Theoecology Journal* as Vol II Issue 2 in December 2013. One of the speakers Scott Van Horn, from NC Wildlife Resources Commission summarized his concern in a letter (See Appendix 1 below) to the senior author of this article. He was not happy with the definition of dominianism, as interpreted from Genesis 1. He was also unhappy about the way ‘End Times’ is discussed by theologians, often to imply what we do now to the natural resources is not really a matter of any concern because when Jesus returns there will be “new creation.” Van Horns’ interpretation calls for clarification. Let us point out here what Dr. David K. Clark’s viewpoint. He makes the following points that are very much in tune with the mission of *Theoecology Journal*: A. Clark's lamentation over isolation of Christian theology from Academia (p.198). B. Clark does not want to see 'Science' and 'Theology' at war with one another, He points out compatibility and complimentary approach between theology and science (p.278).

This compatibility between theology and science is possible because both look at the same reality as there is only one reality. As John Polkinghorne points out there is the possibility for “mutual interaction as science and theology present their different perspectives onto the one world of existent reality.”³ This view of reality can be explained by thinking of different maps. For example, there are different kinds of maps of North Carolina such as a road map or a topographical map. Different maps speak to different aspects of the same state and one can see how such maps provide a fuller and harmonizing view of North Carolina. What is in view are different aspects (different maps) of the same piece of land, hence the maps are not in conflict but rather are complementary. In the same way, theology and science look at the same reality –

³ John C. Polkinghorne. *One World: The Interaction of Science and Theology*. (London: SPCK, 1986; new ed., West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press. 2007), x.

the same world – from different perspectives and therefore, there is no final conflict. The main point here is that science and theology need not be in conflict when understood in this way.

A point of clarification, however, is in order here. The present *Appeal of the Theoecology Journal* asks that theists and atheists work together on solving ecological problems facing humanity. No attempt to associate science, as a discipline, with atheism is intended although there may be many within the field of science who deny the existence of God. Brazemore, for example, only introduces science as giving a satisfactory explanation of what is without any appeal to the supernatural, hence explaining his atheism. However, one must not conclude that science, as a proper discipline, necessitates atheism as is demonstrated by the fact that many of the early scientists (such as Newton) were theists. While it is true that often the debate between science and theology finds a popular expression as atheism against theism that would not be true to fact. The focus here is an appeal for atheists (whether they be scientists or not) and theists to work together in solving the acute problems of our environment. Although this conversation may often appear to place science against theology that is not what is in view here as here the concern is atheists and theists working together to partner in creation care. To be clear, atheists and theists do have differing worldviews, but as Edward O. Wilson suggests in his book, *Creation*, that should not hinder working together to care for creation. Furthermore, science itself is not a worldview, it is a methodology, although scientists all have a worldview. Here there is no attempt to minimize worldview differences, but to set them aside in the practical work of creation care.

The point of agreement here between the theist and the atheist is that both must live in this one reality – this one world – meaning that the care of this planet falls to all members of humanity

regardless of individual religious beliefs. Theists may care for nature because of a moral mandate from God while atheists have the same aim but on pragmatic or other grounds. Nonetheless, both should be concerned about the balanced use of nature even if for differing reasons.

As Francis A. Schaeffer wrote in 1970, “The simple fact is that if man is not able to solve his ecological problems, then man’s resources are going to die.”⁴ As humans, this is our home and nature supplies what is necessary for humanity’s survival as things are today. If man rapes nature with total disregard for consequences for humanity, then all are threatened – atheists and theists alike as well as nature. Roger Scruton has put it well when he writes, “The environmental problem arises because we have treated the earth as an object and an instrument, in something like the way that we have treated the human being as an object and an instrument.... We deal with the world by pricing it. Things that are valued only for their use can then be compared with, exchanged against, and sold for other things of the same kind. They can be consumed, depleted and thrown away, by the person who nevertheless acknowledges the only value that they have, which is the cost of replacement. That is what we now do to each other and to the earth. Yet the earth is irreplaceable, just as we are.”⁵ The reality of this fact is inescapable and therefore there is good reason we should all work together for a more balanced view of nature, where profit is possible without destruction of nature.

All should join together regardless of particular worldviews in order to stand against the human greed and irresponsible behavior where man lives selfishly with no thought of future generations.

⁴ Francis A. Schaeffer. *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1970), 10.

⁵ Roger Scruton, *The Face of God* (London: The Continuum Publishing Group, 2012), 127.

This is a call for the responsible self making right, if hard choices, as we do have choices and those choices will have consequences. Whether one believes in an afterlife or not, all should believe in a common responsibility to ourselves and our progeny with regard to the proper use of nature. Furthermore, for the Christian it should be much more than that, it should be because she has a moral responsibility before God to treat nature as that which is created by God for its own purposes and value in its own right. If understood properly, the dominion given to man by God will not be an excuse to rape nature, but use it in a responsible and balanced way.

* Blue-lettered words from Robert Y. George (Scientist), red-lettered words from Bruce A. Little (theologian) and black-and-white-lettered words from Michael Bazemore (Atheist).

Prof. Bob George
President, GIBS.

Hi Bob,

Sorry about the long delay in responding to you. There were several reasons for the delay. First is I have been waiting for a guy I used to work with to firm up his visit dates to NC to see me and his old major professor Rich Noble. The guy I'm hosting has us up to his cabin in MN for a couple weeks of fishing and fellowship each year in September. I still don't have any dates, his brother died and things are all up in the air.

The second issue is a little more difficult for me to know how to define or address. I learned a lot when you included me in the faith based environmental workshop you held in Wake Forest last year. One of the things that I learned was that dominionism over the earth promised in Genesis may not be the major impediment to people of faith failing to embrace environmental stewardship. What I hear repeatedly is God is in control and has a plan. That means the faithful don't have to worry about consequences of their environmental choices, it really is up to God how things turn out. The other thing I hear is that we are in the "End Times" and it is too late to worry about the fate of the planet. Under the circumstances, the real mission of many of the bible literalists is to save souls since saving the planet is a moot point.

I don't meet any kind of test your conservative Christian friends might apply to define a person of faith. I saw very little evidence that any of the theologians at the workshop were really concerned about environmental stewardship and willing to dialogue with the scientists present with the exceptions of Dr. Little and Pastor Milioni. Honestly, I was offended by the workshop's keynote speaker. He didn't extend an olive branch to the scientists in the audience, he warned that collaborating with environmentalists was consorting with people with false gods. I'm not sure under the circumstances that my continued participation in your at least "admirable in concept" reaching out to the faith based community on environmental stewardship is either comfortable or productive for me. In fairness, you have approached what seems to me the most difficult potential collaborators in dealing with the Seminary in Wake Forest. Dr. Little strikes me as perhaps an extraordinary exception to the rule among his peers.

With regards,

Scott VH
DR. Scott Van Horn
NC Wildlife Commission