

Francis A. Schaeffer. *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1970) 93 pages + appendix 28 pages..

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Francis A. Schaeffer (1912-1984) was born in Pennsylvania, but lived much of his life with his family in Huemoz, Switzerland until shortly before his death. The move to Europe in 1948 was to establish a Presbyterian children's work in war-torn Europe. However, in 1955 he and his wife Edith established a Christian ministry which they named L'Abri (Fr. Shelter). Here his initial children's ministry took a different path as Schaeffer started to reach out to university students with the Christian message. In May 1960 *Time* magazine carried an article on Schaeffer referring to him as missionary to the European intellectual.

It was Schaeffer's conviction that Christianity spoke to all areas of life because this is God's creation. As a consequence of this conviction, Schaeffer spoke out about man's destructive and irresponsible use of nature causing such problems as water and air pollution. Moved by this conviction, in 1970 Schaeffer wrote a brief Christian response to the then current global ecological problems which he believed created an urgent problem for that generation.

The title of his book, *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology*, reflects the seriousness of the problem as he saw it. Schaeffer framed his response around an article that appeared in the *Saturday Review* (Dec 7, 1967) by Richard L. Means, a sociologist, titled "Why Worry about Nature?" In this article, Means approvingly quoted the article by Lynn White, Jr. titled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" which had appeared in *Science* earlier that year (Mar. 10, 1967). (The full text of each essay was included in the Appendix of his book). According to Schaeffer, both men blamed historic Christianity for the growing ecological calamities and both suggested that the way out was some form of pantheism.

Means had suggested that Christianity had a bad view of nature in that "Christianity taught that man had dominion over nature and so man has treated nature in a destructive way" (12), a view also voiced by White. In addition, White had claimed that Christianity's view of the transcendent God "made for an easy exploitation of nature" (23). In his response Schaeffer argued that both had a wrong view of Christian teaching regarding nature. Furthermore, he demonstrated that any form of pantheism (Buddhism or otherwise) fails to give sufficient grounding both philosophically and practically for a proper view of creation and hence failed as a way out of the ecology crisis. After critiquing pantheism as well as other alternative worldviews Schaeffer sets forth a case for historic Christianity as not only the best understanding

of nature, but the only view that could provide a sufficient moral and philosophical foundation for true ecological solutions.

In chapter one, Schaeffer speaks to the general problem facing modern man (remember he is writing in 1970) and acknowledges the fact that Christians for the most part have not had a “better sense about these things [ecological matters] than unbelievers” (11). However, Schaeffer makes the point that the failure lies not in Christian teaching, but in the practical inconsistency of the teaching by Christians.

Schaeffer critiques Means’ pantheistic solution in chapter two finding it wanting. While agreeing with Means’ view that the ecological matters primarily reflect a moral crisis, he shows that in the end Means’ lack of transcendent moral categories eventually leaves him with merely pragmatics. Furthermore, he shows why pantheism cannot provide a proper foundation for developing a response to the ecological calamities of the 20th century. He argues against Means’ (and also White’s) complaint that the Christian view of a transcendent God removed God from nature showing that that is not a true Christian understanding of God’s relationship to nature.

On the point of the ecological problem being a moral crisis, Schaeffer agrees but argues that because modern man has no true moral categories, his moral notions eventually come to nothing more than personal preference which is a moral pragmatism. On the possibility of pantheism offering a solution, Schaeffer replies that pantheism fails for several reasons. The first is that it gives no meaning to the particulars on the account we are of one essence (what Means argues for). Whereas nature is a particular, and if particulars have no meaning, then, Schaeffer argues, it is difficult to see how that would give rise to taking nature seriously. As he points out, pantheism gives an answer “for unity, but it gives no meaning to the diversity” (30). In addition, whereas the pantheistic view sees nature as normal, it has no answer for the part of nature that is hostile to man. As Schaeffer points out, nature has “two faces: it has a benevolent face, but it may also be an enemy” (31).

In chapter three Schaeffer deals with what he names the Platonic dichotomy. This view, he argues also fails to provide a sufficient view of the world on which to basis a proper understanding of nature. This view, he argues, places emphasis on the transcendent reality and depreciates the value of particulars. Schaeffer suggests that in some places even Christianity has been influenced by such Platonic thinking. In this case, he notes, one has a “Christianity that is failing to take into account man’s responsibility and proper relationship to nature” (42). So, the Platonic view, even if attached to Christianity, is not going to help as it fails to give nature its proper place as part of God’s creation. Unless nature is viewed with its own integrity on its own right, that is, that it is important because it is God’s creation, the true moral crisis of the

ecological problem will not be solved. What Schaeffer proposes is what he calls a biblical view of creation which gives a proper “attitude to and our treatment of nature” and it is this notion that is developed in the remainder of the book (42).

Schaeffer begins chapter four with his case for a biblical view of nature by commenting on the Genesis account of creation. The important point, Schaeffer says, is that it makes a distinction between creator and creation, between the infinite and the finite. This argues against pantheism. Furthermore, Genesis claims man is made in the image of God marking him out as ontologically special within the larger sphere of nature. Whereas man is in God’s image, his first relationship is upward toward God and then a downward toward nature. However, man’s proper downward relationship is predicated upon his being in proper relationship with God. Whereas man is made in the image of God he is morally responsible to God for how he exercises dominion over nature. This, Schaeffer argues, serves as a corrective to man abusing or raping nature even if Christians have not always been consistent on this point.

Schaeffer goes on to point out that man is different than the rest of creation on account of being made in the image of God and yet he shares something in common with nature in that both are created by God. Schaeffer notes: “Yet, on the other hand, when I turn around and I face nature, I face something that is like myself. I, too, am created, just as the animal and the plant and the atom are created” (51). So, in the end Schaeffer writes, “On a very different level, we are separated from that which is the ‘lower’ form of creation [nature], yet we are united to it. I am separate from it because I am made in the image of God . . . Yet at the same time I am united to it [nature] because nature and man are both created by God” (53). In this sense both are dependent on God, hence not autonomous. Therefore Schaeffer argues this is the proper ground on which we should “treat each thing with integrity because that is the way God has made it” (54). Furthermore, Schaeffer’s argument against the Platonic view of nature, namely that nature is not important, is grounded in the resurrection of Christ. Nature is important as demonstrated in the fact that “Christ’s body was raised from the dead. This is really a very important point” (55), notes Schaeffer. If the natural world is not important, then there is no answer for why God raised an earthly body that it might occupy a place at God’s right hand.

He agrees with White’s critique of the poor ecological track record of Christians, but then adds, “it is not because Christianity does not have the answer, but because we have not acted on the answer; not because Christianity does not have a view that gives a greater value to the tree than the animist can give it, but because we haven’t acted on the value that we know, or should know, it has as a creature of God” (58-9). When Christian teaching is properly applied, Schaeffer is confident that it can serve as a true solution to the ecological problem under the present circumstances thereby averting an ecological catastrophe. For Schaeffer this is the right meaning

of dominion where humanity cares for God's creation realizing that ultimately the final solution is to be found in Christ's return to make all things new.

In chapter five Schaeffer argues that while the Christian waits for the coming of Christ to restore all things to their original created state, there is place for what he calls substantial, not perfect, healing in nature today. Schaeffer points out that although it is true that man has been given dominion over nature, he is required to treat nature rightly as it has value in itself because it is a thing made by God. This means that man must exercise proper dominion "without being destructive" (72). Admittedly, he thinks that up to this point orthodox Christianity has done a poor job on this account. According to Schaeffer, a proper view of Christian dominion would be when, for example, she must cut down a tree for right purposes, she must remember that it has its "own value as a tree" (76). If this is a proper understanding of biblical story of creation, then Schaeffer believes that Christians must bring their theology of creation to bear on the present ecology problems to give a responsible and balanced view of nature resulting in an ecological healing for the planet.

This brings Schaeffer to his final chapter, titled "The 'Pilot Plant'" where he calls upon the Christian Church to be a model by which the world can see "the healing of man and himself, of man and man, and man and nature" (82). He recognizes that to treat creation responsibly may mean that on the front end it costs a little more money or take a little longer but the dividends for nature and man would be worth it. The Christian Church must exhibit this view in the way she conducts her business in this world. Too often, according to Schaeffer, greed blinds humanity to its responsibility to care for nature properly. As he notes, "after all, greed is destructive against nature at this point and there is time to take one's time" (85). He points to strip-mining as an example and calls upon Christians to be bold enough to say: "Stop!" According to Schaeffer, Christians should do this on moral grounds and for Schaeffer, only Christianity has the moral categories necessary to address the moral dimension of the ecological problem. In Schaeffer's view, not only should the Christian Church practice a balanced and responsible attitude towards nature in its own community, it should also be a voice against destructive practices by those outside its community.

Schaeffer concludes by pointing out that the application of a total Christian worldview is not only a Christian imperative, but a necessity for ecological healing of our planet. He writes: "When we have learned this—the Christian view of nature – then there can be a real ecology; beauty will flow, psychological freedom will come, and the world will cease to be turned into a desert. Because it is right, on the basis of the whole Christian system – which is strong enough to stand it all, because it is true. . . ." (93). According to Schaeffer, if taken seriously, this could help bring a proper balance between the needs of man and protection of nature.

