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Alternatives and Accusations in Christians'  
Attitudes to the Environment

In this paper, given to the VICTORIA INSTITUTE in a recent Symposium. Professor R.J. Berry outlines, from a Christian angle, current views on man's attitude to his environment.

There are two opposites in Christian attitudes to the environment. The first is described in a story told by Gavin Maxwell (*Observer*, 13 October 1963): "A minister of the Church of Scotland, walking along the foreshore with a shotgun, found two otter cubs (which Maxwell had brought from Nigeria) at play by the tide's edge and shot them ... The minister expressed regret, but reminded a journalist 'The Lord gave man control over the beasts of the field ...'". The other is caricatured by a clergyman in a *Punch* cartoon addressing an old man leaning on the gate of a well-tended cottage garden, "It is wonderful what the hand of man can do to a piece of earth with the aid of Divine Providence". The gardener's reply was, "You should 'ave seen this piece when Divine Providence 'ad it all to itself".

These two anecdotes picture two strands of thought which have persisted in both religious and secular thought over centuries, and which can be described as "triumphalist" and "mystical" respectively or, in terms of the relation of man to nature as "exclusionist" and "inclusionist" (Elder, 1970). Inevitably there are many variations on these themes, and Christians have vehemently defended a host of different positions of varying worth. The following pages set out five particular tensions in environmental thinking which are commonly described as "problems" or "errors". The intention is that exposure of these questions will lead to a surer environmental theology than currently exists. Much thinking at the moment is unconsciously pragmatic, and it is not a little worrying that Christian doctrine is being expounded in ways that have surfaced only in recent years since environmental problems became pressing — notwithstanding or perhaps, because of valuable expositions from two Anglican bishops (Montefiore, 1970; Taylor, 1975).

### 1. Progress v Depravity

Pollution is increasingly obvious, and it is this which has brought home the fact that our environment is more than an envelope. The *Torrey Canyon* disaster in March 1967 was a valuable prod in beginning environmental concern for many people, and stimulating the British government (at least) to take control action. In retrospect the effects of the wreck of the tanker were comparatively small. Much of the damage to wild-life was caused by the detergent used to clear the oil. Several times as many birds were killed 2½ years later off the north and west of Britain without any known acute cause: an estimated 200,000 birds failed to survive the autumn, and the only cause that could be suggested was the presence of high levels of chlorinated hydrocarbons (DDT and its chemical relatives) and polychlorinated biphenyls (an assumed inert by-product of plastics manufacture) in many of the corpses.

But the killing action of pollution is only part of its effects: we are fortunate indeed if we are not plagued by aircraft noise, car fumes, empty plastic bottles or tin cans, sour streams, obtrusive buildings, and other fall-outs from our fellows. So much of this is the fruit of recent technology that it is surprising to find that men have been fouling their nests apparently as long as they have been on earth.

In A.D. 61 Seneca claimed, "as soon as I had got out of the heavy air of Rome and from the stink of the smoky chimneys thereof, which, being stirred, poured forth whatever pestilent vapours and soot they held enclosed in them, I felt an alteration of my disposition", whilst Eleanor of Aquitaine (wife of Henry II) must have had similar feelings in 1257 when she moved to Tutbury Castle from Nottingham to escape "the undesirable smoke".

John Evelyn expressed a sentiment about London in 1661 which many modern Londoners will echo despite the various Clean Air Acts: "That Hellish and dismal Cloud of Sea Coale which is not only perpetually imminent but so universally mixed with the otherwise wholesome and excellent Aer, that her Inhabitants breathe nothing but an impure and thick Mist, accompanied with a fuliginous and filthy vapour, which rends them obnoxious to a thousand inconveniences, corrupting the Lungs and disordering the entire habit of their Bodies; so that Catharrs, Phthisicks, Coughs and Consumptions, rage more in this one City than in the whole Earth besides".

What is new about our present situation is that it is much more difficult to escape than it used to be. We are running out of habitable world at the rate of two babies every second, and it is possible only for the favoured few to flee to unspoiled country or to move into the virgin pastures of a New World - as did the Beaker Folk, the Vikings, the American colonists, or even the adventurers of the heyday of Empire. The human population is now doubling every 30 or so years after increasing only relatively slowly throughout human history. (To put the rate of population increase into meaningful terms, think of twice the number of people as now crowding into buses or shops by the turn of the century). Although it is true that restricting population size *per se* will not solve many problems, it is likely to be a prerequisite for solving most of them.

The standard answer to the problems of 'progress' (which include the decline in infant mortality that is largely responsible for the growth in population numbers) is that they are transient and will yield to technological inventiveness. For example, atomic power will replace fossil fuel, new foods and culture methods will be developed, sophisticated manufacture will be able to control its pollutants, and so on. John Maddox, formerly editor of *Nature* is the chief prophet of this optimistic Utopia.

Unfortunately prophets of doom have a better record of being right than prophets of success, from Thomas More and Francis Bacon on. The "green revolution" is an excellent example of this. The high-yielding strains of cereals developed during the 1950s and 1960s were seen as a probable solution to chronic under-nutrition in places like India and Indonesia. Unfortunately these strains need high doses of fertilizer to achieve their theoretical yield, and this is not readily available in the Third World. Grown with traditional husbandry, they produce only as much or less food than ordinary strains. Borlaug, who received a Nobel Prize in 1970 for his part in developing the Green Revolution strains, prophesied in 1965 that the world's population could be fed for 100-200 years; by 1969 he had shortened the time to "two to three decades".

Without taking sides in the optimism debate:

- a. Technological answers may not help for particular individuals. For example, at the peak of the Babylonian Empire the land between the Tigris and the Euphrates supported two crops a year and considerable grazing in between, but is now largely desert. Probably what happened is that irrigation channels led to more and more salts being deposited on the land. This means declining yields and the need to cultivate more

land to produce sufficient food. As the available water was spread even wider, canals would have silted up, leading to the cultivators spending an increasing amount of their time clearing them. At one time Ur of the Chaldees was a seaport, but now it is 150 miles from the sea, with its buildings buried under 25 feet of silt washed from the alluvial plain. There must have been an "ecological crisis" for the Babylonians, when it was realized that the limits of local production had been reached, and their technology of civilization stretched to breaking point.

- b. Orthodox Christian doctrine has always stressed the depravity of man living in a fallen world. Unfortunately for the theologians, most of us in the west live in an increasingly comfortable world in the material sense (with electric power, piped water, sewers, insulated houses, etc.). The effect has been that the fallen world doctrine has been "spiritualized", producing a weak doctrine of the environment. It is encouraging and challenging that Fraser Darling (Reith Lecturer and doyen conservationist) recognizes that "science without ethics in managing the habitable places of the earth is frightening".

## 2. *Self v Society*

Paul Ehrlich expresses the environment impact of humanity  
 = population x affluence x technology.

Authorities differ about the weighting to be placed on the different elements in this equation, but all writers agree that human impact produces "a complaint from which recovery will not be spontaneous" (Southwood, 1972).

The problem in reducing the impact of "the earth-pest, man" continues the theme of depravity at the point where individuals relate to society. Garret Hardin (1968) has called the result of this "the tragedy of the commons", using tragedy not in the sense of unhappiness, but as meaning "the solemnity of the remorseless working of things".

Hardin's argument is concerned with the impossibility of limiting population growth voluntarily. He begins with a pasture, open to all. Every local will try to keep as many cattle as possible on it. Such an arrangement may work satisfactorily for centuries because tribal wars, poaching and disease keep the numbers of both man and beast well below the carrying capacity of the land. Finally, however comes the long-desired goal of social stability when the logic of the commons inexorably generates tragedy.

Imagine a common which can support 40 beasts, with 20 herds-men entitled to graze their animals. This means two beasts per farmer.

But any of the 20 may ask what would be the effect of acquiring a single extra animal. The answer is spectacular 50 per cent increase in personal output and wealth at the expense of only one extra animal on the common. The problem is that all 20 are likely to reason the same way and 60 animals will appear on land capable of feeding only 40. Results: deterioration of both pasture and animals.

Hardin applies this primarily to the number of children each couple agrees to have, but extends it to the way we treat the environment. For example, discharged waste (sewage, chemical or radioactive effluent) costs less if a manufacturer releases them into the common stream, air, or sea, and then pays his "share" of the cost of purifying the common. In other words, voluntary cooperation for the group good is largely fictitious.

*"The Historical Roots of our ecological Crisis"*

Lynn White, a University of Californian historian, has specifically linked individual depravity to environmental problems (White, 1967). When man first began to settle and farm - what we call the "neolithic revolution" at the time Adam was in Eden with Eve, and all was right with the world - every family unit was independent. Early ploughs did not turn the sod but merely scratched it, so that cross-ploughing was needed and fields were squareish. This was fine for the light soils and semiarid climate of the Mediterranean area, but ineffective on the wet and often sticky soils of northern Europe. By the 7th century, the modern plough with its attached share had been invented. This needed a team of oxen to pull it, and fields became long and thin to make strip cultivation easier.

Now a team of oxen involved the pooling of the resources of individual families. Man became an exploiter of both his fellows and his fields. This is elegantly shown by illustrated calendars which prior to 830 AD showed the months as passive events each with its own attributes, but then changed to depict man as coercing nature - ploughing, harvesting, chopping trees, butchering pigs. Man and nature were two things, with man the master.

Church tradition adapted to this technological change. The significant debate ranged around the rights of possession and wealth (Black, 1970). The early Church Fathers argued that

God "intended the world to be the common possession of men", but because greed was a consequence of the Fall, private right of enjoyment of property was the only way in which an individual's requirements could be safe-guarded.

The development of this to link private property rights with social obligations came in mediaeval times, and was summarized by Aquinas in the 13th century:

1. Natural law provides that natural things are provided by God for the use of all men.
2. Human law requires a system of private property "because every one is more concerned with the obtaining of what concerns himself alone than with the common affairs of all ... for each one, avoiding extra labour, leaves the common task to the next man, and human affairs are dealt with in a more orderly manner when each has his own business to go about ... It is among those who posses something jointly and in common that disputes frequently arise".
3. The use of property must be limited to that which is reasonable for the individual.

Thomist thought limited property ownership and usury, and thus stood in the way of economic development: "He who takes usury goes to hell; he who does not, goes to the workhouse". This impasse was resolved by Locke (*Two Treatises on Government*, 1690) who produced a rationalisation for unequal and unlimited private property rights, arguing:

1. Money cannot be spoilt, and is not a "property" in the same sense as land, and
2. A man's labour is his own, to do with as he likes. This means that society is not involved, and no social obligations are added if labour produces an increase in property-rights. This opened the way for the worst excesses of the industrial revolution.

Locke also maintained that the only justification for the existence of the state was the preservation of private property. Whilst implicitly welcoming the Lockean thesis to escape from the Thomist dilemma, nevertheless the state has intervened increasingly in the economic and social life of individuals on a claim of exercising social responsibility. This has produced a situation not all that far removed from the traditional Christian position, albeit with the State substituted for the individual as the responsible agent (not, as Black *loc. cit.* maintains, substituted for God).

As the state has developed as the agent of social responsibility, problems have arisen because "duty to society" is interpretable only in terms of the decisions of society, and there is no way of restraining resource exploitation if society favours policies which can only end in deterioration. This has led to the "spoilt child" attitude of pressure groups (Taylor, 1975) (such as the decline of water-borne traffic in Britain through the actions of the railway companies). This in turn produces a corresponding submergence of personal responsibility and accountability.

A cruel example of lack of personal responsibility and the denial of a proper relationship between self and society is the Puritan settlement of New England in the 17th century (Carroll, 1969; Paterson, 1971). The colonists regarded North America as the Promised Land - a sanctuary from their Egypt, a testing ground, and a meeting place with God. Since Eden was a garden, they assumed that the reduction of wilderness to garden (and, incidentally, the reduction of the savage inhabitants of the land to civilization through the gospel) was a properly Christian task. To them wild country was basically immoral, and its opposite was glorifying to God. Any action taken to bring wilderness into cultivation or, by labour, to exploit natural resources, partook of the quality of virtue. They would have been horrified by the later, romantic cult of wilderness expounded by Thoreau and Leopold. It was in terms of this Puritan, wilderness-to-garden ethic that the advance of the frontier westward across America took place. The hostility of nature to man was obvious - in flood and drought, forest and desert. "A directly comparable British example was the 'improvements' of the Scottish Highlands in the first half of the nineteenth century, involving the clearance of the inhabitants to the coast or the colonies. In almost all cases this was supported by the local ministers". (Prebble, 1963) To 'conquer' nature in these circumstances was no more than obedience to God's original command to Adam.

### 3. *Over-riding v Intermediate Technology*

A theology that separates man from the rest of creation and produces a dualism between redemption and creation, has much in common with optimistic humanism. A false doctrine of man is as much the heresy of our age as deism was of the 19th century. With varying emphases Charles Kingsley, Bertrand Russell, Julian Huxley, and the theological liberals of a few years ago were telling us that automation and cybernetics would finally remove the curse put on Adam at the Fall. If there was a remaining problem, it was how to educate ourselves to endless leisure. The so-called "developing countries" would catch up



with us in a very short time ("the Development Decade") as science and technology were applied to their problems.

But the glory has gone: not only failures like box girder bridges and high alumina cement, but also a psychical disenchantment has set in. Some of this is reaction to excessive claims. This is typified by the Aswan affair: in a fanfare of promises, water began to be stored in 1964, and the dam was finished in 1971. But:

1. The loss of nutrients washed into the Eastern Mediterranean has meant that a catch of 18,000 tons of sardines a year has declined to 500 tons.
2. The rise in soil salinity in the Nile Valley following the "control" of water flow and extension of irrigation threatens crop productivity.
3. Previously, deposited sediment reduced coastal erosion, as well as protecting the banks of the Nile itself; in recent years, the "regulated" flow of the river has seriously undermined some bridges, and erosion has increased.
4. The sediment from the headwaters of the Nile is now trapped behind the dam, and has to be replaced with artificial fertilizer on the cultivated lands of Egypt.
5. The twice-yearly Nile floods used to interrupt the life cycle of the *Schistosoma* parasite; at least 80% of Egyptian farmers are now affected by schistosomiasis.
6. Evaporation from the lake behind the dam has been far higher than expected, to the extent that the lake was less than half full in 1970 when the predictions from inflow were that it should have been full.
7. The hoped-for fish crop from the lake has been much less than expected.

Overall, the Aswan scheme may be doing slightly more good than harm, but the profit and loss account is not far from balance.

One of the documents that focussed attention on the failings of technology was the January 1972 number of the *Ecologist*, titled *A Blueprint for Survival* (Goldsmith, Allen, Allaby, Davoll & Lawrence, 1972). This brought together the current asymptotic increase in population and resource utilisation with their likely social consequences, and proposed a list of

possible responses, ranging from emergency food programmes for developing countries to power taxes, a removal of subsidies on inorganic fertilizers, an end to road-building, experimental communities, and a positive use for domestic sewage. The *Blueprint* was based on the conclusions of a computer model from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology which attempted to study the interactions of world population, capital, resources, and pollution. This was later published as *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows, Meadows, Randers & Behrens, 1972), with the 'message', "A whole culture has evolved around the principle of fighting against limits rather than learning to live with them". Although there have been many criticisms of *The Limits to Growth* (notably *Thinking About the Future*, produced by a group at Sussex University), their only positive contribution has been to claim "something will turn up". A *Times Literary Supplement* review summarized the situation "The MIT model which underlies *The Limits to Growth* can be regarded as dead. But the issues it raises are very much alive".

One of the harshest critics in Britain of the *Limits* approach has been E.F. Schumacher, on the grounds that the study deals with problems in overall global terms instead of locating them in areas of particular concentration: "It is perfectly obvious that there is no means whatsoever at our disposal to stop the growth of world capital or of world population. What we can do, however, is to fight the growth of what is unsound and promote the growth of what is sound" (Schumacher, 1973, 1974).

Charles Birch of the University of Sydney expresses the same point in graphic language, "Originally a unit of population was simply a human being whose needs were met by eating 22500 calories and 60 gms of protein a day. Man's daily need of energy was equivalent to the continuous burning of a single 100 watt bulb. A unit of population today in the developed world consists of a human being wrapped in tons of steel, copper, aluminium, lead, tin, zinc and plastics, gobbling up 60 lbs of raw steel and many pounds of other materials. Far from getting these things in his homeland he ranges abroad much as a hunter and more often than not in the poorer countries. His energy need ..... is equivalent to ten 1000 watt radiators continuously burning" (Birch, 1972).

The Amos condemning this imbalance of energy and resource use has become Edward Schumacher. Influenced by work he did for the Indian Planning Commission in the early 1960s, he argues that development aid usually by-passes the rural areas of poor countries, although they are the areas of greatest need and also the areas on which the economies of the poor countries ultimately

depend. Unless this rural poverty is tackled at source, it is bound to lead to mass migration to the cities and the destructive unrest of a hungry urban proletariat. The most effective aid is that which is given in simple ways to enable peasants and half-skilled city workers to advance themselves a little at a time. An Asian Christian youth conference in 1973 had a Coca Cola bottle superimposed on a map of Asia on the programme cover, and the words, "Lead us not into imitation".

Schumacher contrasts:

A textile factory in East Africa, the gift of a European government, which was so highly automated that it needed to employ 500 workers only. The capital value of the plant was about £1½ million, so each work-place had in fact cost £3000. Yet armed guards had to protect the factory from crowds desperate for jobs. The government of the receiving country had asked for the factory to be built in a far-off rural town because there was so much unemployment in the region.

With:

The provision of egg-trays for Zambia where egg production is encouraged to fill the protein gap. Unfortunately marketing eggs requires egg-trays, and most of the world's egg-trays are made by one multi-national company whose smallest production unit would make a million trays a month. Zambia's entire annual need was one million trays. A team from Reading University devised a means of making egg-trays at 1/50th the cost of such a large plant.

Schumacher believes the 19th century truth that the "bigger the better" has become a 20th century myth. He calls for organization and production units to return to a human scale:

1. Small units of production can use small resources — a very important point when concentrated large resources are becoming scarce or inaccessible.
2. Small units are ecologically sounder than big ones: the pollution or damage they may cause has a better chance of fitting into "nature's tolerance margins".
3. Small units can be used for decentralized production leading to a more even distribution of the population, a better use of space, the avoidance of congestion and of monster transport.

4. Most important of all: small units, of which there can be a great number, enable more people to "do their thing" than large units of which there can be only a few.

He maintains smallness is conducive to simplicity, and from the Christian point of view, simplicity is a value in itself. Making a living should not absorb all or most of a man's attention, energy or time, as if it were the primary purpose of his existence on earth. "Complexity forces people to become so highly specialized that it is virtually impossible for them to attain to wisdom or wider understanding".

This extrapolation from technological megalomania to 'intermediate technology' becomes particularly intriguing when it is realised how many have come to the same conclusion from vastly different starting points. For example, Bishops John Taylor, Lesslie Newiggin, and Cuthbert Bardsley have independently asserted recently that the call of God to the Church in this generation is to modify and simplify our life-style.

Leaving aside any Christian connotation, at least two other prophets have come to the same diagnosis about the dehumanising effects of complexity:

Desmond Morris (especially in the *Human Zoo*, 1969) has argued from the biological point of view that the destruction of "natural" social units has led to the erection of substitute landmarks — the frustrated leader becomes the Napoleon of the local chess society, our sexual life becomes stylised and subject to artificial stimuli, and we become increasingly part of a plastic culture.

Rattray Taylor (*Rethink*, 1972) takes essentially the same position, and John Poulton (1973) has extended this as "that cheated feeling ..... a study of alienation":

1. Mobility has destroyed both the extended family and local loyalties, and resulted in a chronic difficulty for many of forming loving relationships.
2. We are faced with challenges we cannot meet, which generate either boredom or frustration through our inability to influence them.
3. We need to feel what we do is worthwhile, and only professional people can feel this: "we have hardly begun to study the problem of rehumanizing work".

4. We cannot achieve security for ourselves and our families; it is done for us, and that is dehumanizing in itself. The government properly looks after the hardest-pressed and deprived, but reduces the psychic health of the majority of us.
5. A goods-orientated society is not equivalent to satisfying psychological needs; indeed it produces a psychological slum through drab despair.

#### 4. *Functional v Arbitrary Morality*

This is the heart of the matter, differentiating pragmatism from puerility. Curry-Lindahl (1972) believes "ecology as a philosophy for survival may well have the potential to develop into a kind of religion for the younger generations of today and the world of tomorrow .....". This is facile and possibly desperate humanism. The Christian doctrine towards the world is undoubtedly stewardship. Taylor (1975) expresses it as positive monism (or holism) through a theology of *shalom*: "the blessedness of the inter-related, God-related community which can be thought of as either wholeness or harmony. This leads to a consistent attitude diametrically opposed to the excess of current Western economics". His biblical bases for this doctrine are:

1. Rejection of greed (Jer. 22: 13-17, Hab. 2: 9-11; Prov. 30: 15,16).
  2. Condemnation of covetousness (Col. 3: 5) and exaltation of moderation (Phil. 4: 4; Col. 1: 16, 17; 2 Pet. 3: 5,6), which leads to a distinction between primary goods (either renewable or non-renewable) and secondary ones produced from the primary by manufacture or service.
  3. God's provision described in the law of gleaning ("Remember what kind of God I am ... Enough is enough, and the less fortunate will be glad of what is left ... Remember you were slaves in Egypt" - Lev. 19: 9,10; Deut. 25: 19-22).
- the law of limited cropping and the fallow seventh year (Ex.23: 10, 11; Lev. 25: 1-7).

the law of first-fruits — a prohibition of snatching the chance of a high price because of the scarcity of the first-fruits. This is a direct contradiction to the accepted law of supply and demand.

the law against usury, which permitted the taking of a pledge as security, but not harshness in enforcing it (Ezek. 18: 16, 17; Deut. 24: 10, 11). The early Church Councils forbade charging interest, and it was for this reason that Western monarchs imported Jews — to serve as money-lenders. The Civil Law of England only allowed the charging of interest in 1571; the Irish Church in 1634 was still subjecting usurers to the same ecclesiastical sanctions as adulterers.

Although the scriptural principles are clear, the ecclesiastical application of them was foolishly rigid. "The Church had become so institutionalized in its thinking that it tried to use casuistry to show how old regulations could be twisted sufficiently to become applicable to the new circumstances" (Taylor, 1975).

*The Proper Model.* The rational use of any resource involves cropping it so that its sustainable yield is maximised, like using interest whilst preserving capital (Berry, 1972). This in turn implies good husbandry of the resource, and about this there may be scientific disagreement. For example, the trend of modern agriculture is towards simplification — the removal of hedges and the planting of large areas of single crops — and particular strains of crops. Among others, Elton (1958) has given a series of reasons for believing that simple (ecological) systems are less stable and more liable to fluctuations than are complex ones, and quotes Is. 5: 8 in this context: "Woe to them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth". He argues that efforts must be made to maintain diversity to achieve stability.

The proper management of a resource or habitat involves a knowledge of the normal restraints and controls upon the ecosystem in question. In former days this would have been referred to as natural law, in recognition of the creatorhood of God; nowadays the language will be that of science. Nevertheless the correct treatment of the situation will be the same, whatever the understanding of natural law we happen to have; we must interpret our actions by the system itself, just as we use the instruction in the maker's handbook in looking after and using a motor-car.

A cautionary tale about the relation between God's commands and the proper treatment of a habitat comes from the fate of the Promised Land after several centuries of occupation by the Israelites. Before they entered the land, God warned the Israelites that disobedience to His commands would produce desolation (Lev. 26). In the event they disobeyed in ways which had disastrous effects:

1. The land was chronically over-crowded because the people failed to occupy the whole area intended for them.
2. It was devastated in a series of wars, many of them resulting from unwise or forbidden alliances made by Israel.

The effect was misuse which became embarrassingly obvious in the marginal environment of the eastern Mediterranean.

This interpretation of the responsibility of the Israelites makes sense only if God is active and effective in this world, since then the world has to be treated as His handywork (Berry, 1975). Ironically if God is remote from His World, if He 'finished' it on the sixth day and only interferes on occasion, the attitude of the Christian becomes different. Environmental rape becomes permissible. A care for the environment depends theologically on a dynamic doctrine of God's activity.

This argument has been developed by Moule (1964), especially in his exegesis of Rom. 8: 20 ff: "Creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice but because of Adam's sin which pulled down nature with it, since God created Adam to be in close connection with nature", i.e. the 'curse' is a causal consequence of Adam's behaviour, not a petulant action of an arbitrary despot. "BUT the disaster was not unattended by hope — the hope that nature too, with man, will be released from its servitude to decay into the glorious freedom which characterizes man when he is a true and obedient son of God".

##### 5. *Withdrawal v Stewardship*

There is a persisting attitude throughout Christian history of the corruptness of matter: knowledge has been accorded more importance than grace, mind than matter. Evangelicals have contributed to this in the pietistic tradition by rightly emphasizing redemption but wrongly contrasting it with providence (or common grace) (q.v. Anderson, 1968; Triton, 1969).

Derrick, a Roman Catholic, has developed this conflict in terms of environmental attitudes (*The Delicate Creation*, 1972). He points out that it arises from the same negative attitude to the body which for many is the Christian view of sex, and thrives on stress, grievance and disappointment. It starts with the sense of living in a hostile environment, and the feeling we belong elsewhere; creation becomes an area of wickedness and cruelty. In other worlds, the Fall is magnified at the expense of God's control.

Historically this approach was identified with a number of the expressions of gnosticism which Derrick lumps together as Manichaeism: aware of evil in the world, man projects this upon the world and devises a theology to suit. Inevitably such theologies contrast the good God (remote, gentle, and wholly beyond our knowing in this world) with the very inferior working deity who made this material universe. One version of this fallacy equates the lesser deity with the Jehovah of the Old Testament, and thus compounds heresy about God with error about Scripture. A sign of the Manichaean heresy is that its adherents are recurringly perverse and disruptive (since the established order is by definition evil), and bewilderingly perverse. At one time in mediaeval France a girl could get into trouble with the church for contumacious virginity, since (in the absence of religious vows), this could constitute a Manichaean hatred of the flesh.

By opposing the material to the spiritual, Manichaean gnosticism produces a wholly unscriptural dualism. Indeed the main post-Darwinian confusion about the relation of Creator to creation really boils down to an unwillingness to accept a doctrine of God as responsible for and active in creation — immanent as well as irruptive. Scripture is consistent in excluding any contrast between mind and matter. For example, Paul always contrasts the moral antithesis of obedience and disobedience, never a material one of body and spirit. Physical death is described as presence with the Lord in the sense of the climax of letting go of the material which has been going on since conversion (Moule, 1965-6). As John Stott (1970) has insisted in part of an argument about the responsibility of Christians of social involvement, "God did not create souls but body-souls called human beings". Nevertheless Manichaean-type dualism still has its theological supporters, principally such exponents as Harvey Cox and Teilhard de Chardin.

As a reaction to anthropocentrism of this type, there are increasing cries for a mystical neopanteism, and a return to the example of Francis of Assisi who blurred man and nature.



One of the more lucid exponents of this viewpoint is McHarg (1969) who has described man as no more than a plant parasite. (Notwithstanding, McHarg who has made a valuable contribution to practical planning, by suggesting that particular sites should be costed in terms of a range of potential values: for housing, industry, communications; the soil and agricultural importance; for scenic, historical, recreational, and educational uses; etc. - q.v. Disney, 1975).

Neither anthropocentrism nor biocentrism does justice to Scripture (Armerding, 1973). The Manichaeian zest to conquer nature has a long and depressing pedigree through the Hanoverian 'improvers', the Victorian capitalists, and the technological satyrs (Passmore, 1974), but the reaction towards animistic primitivism is as bad, and is gathering strength as a "lust for Eden".

The error is justified by asserting that the Creation is fallen as well as man, and is thus merely an extension of man (e.g. Schaeffer, 1970). This contradicts the clear Genesis account that man is distinct from nature specifically and explicitly in his possession of God's image. Consequently laudable efforts to insist on the insignificance of man in relation to God has the byproduct of exalting and sentimentalizing nature. The Garden of Eden becomes a repository of all virtues, and the more we can identify with 'pure' nature, the more sanctified we are.

In November 1974, the *Ecologist* devoted a whole issue to "Religion and Ecology". The editor (Edward Goldsmith) wrote of religion as a control system in limiting behaviour patterns, and the desanctification of nature produced by the decline of religious restraints as that which "makes it possible for modern society systematically to destroy it". It is a short step from this to another article in the same issue (by Robert Waller) which states "Ecology and religion together teach that there is an indivisible structural trinity, humankind, nature and God" - but, and this is the fallacy - that "Nature is the link between the other two".

Another consequence of 'biocentrist' thinking, is that it gives escapism respectability. There are few better comments on this than that of Thor Heyerdahl of *Kon-Tiki*, Easter Island and Ra fame who desired to opt out of the dirt and tension of pre-1939 Norway (!). He found a wife to think as he did, and lived for a year on the Marquesa Islands in the Pacific, where the couple were parasitized, diseased and hungry; polluted by bamboo dust; persecuted and robbed by the local inhabitants.

After they left, Heyerdahl wrote (quoted by Jacoby, 1968):

'There is no paradise to be found on earth today. There are people living in great cities who are far happier than the majority of those in the South Seas. Happiness comes from within, we realize that now ... It is in his mind and way of life that man may find his Paradise - the ability to perceive the true values of life, which are far removed from property and riches, or from power and renown'.

These considerations inevitably lead us to the question as to whether we ought justifiably to describe nature as morally perfect, or tainted with evil. Fortunately this is relatively simple: nature is good, because it is from and upheld by God. But only if nature is an extension of God's being can we impute moral attributes to it.

Consequently:

1. It is unreal to speak of withdrawal or involvement: creation (nature or the environment) is the stage on which we work out God's purposes and which is a vehicle to glorify Him.
2. Our understanding of ourselves becomes doubly important because we are not only responsible to God for the environment, we are responsible to Him for our own maturity which is shaped and modified by our surroundings.

In this context, René Dubos is interesting. He collaborated with the economist Barbara Ward to produce the "key-note" work of the United Nations Stockholm Conference, *Only One Earth: the Care and Maintenance of Our Small Planet* (1972). In reaction against this, he later wrote *A God Within* (1973) as a complementary document. In this he points out that each individual has a unique picture of the world based on genes, family, and experiences, and he describes the conquest of nature as a criminal conceit, philosophically untenable, and destructive, on the grounds that any 'conquest' involves the imposition of homogenized and therefore trivial pressures on our surroundings.

### Conclusions

Obviously there are legitimate conflicting principles in environmental attitudes. For example, DDT is a life-saver in developing tropical countries, but a largely unnecessary pollutant in the temperate Western world. There can be valid argument

about the best conservation practice in a variety of situations and sometimes a Christian will be right in his advocacy, sometimes wrong. However there are at least two specifically Christian contributions which are more than merely educative:

### 1. *Posterity*

The only *logical* reason for a concern for posterity is if an influence persists indefinitely (or for many generations at least). The world's viewpoint is well put by Andrew Schonfield: "Looking after the environment for one's grandchildren is a rich man's preoccupation". Edmund Leach in his Reith Lectures tried hard to rationalize concern for the future with "It will give you a sense of purpose" and "Gods have much more fun", but neither reason holds any ethical water. "Until men come to believe in their hearts that all life is held in trust from God, there can be no ethical reason why we should owe a duty to posterity" (Montefiore, 1970).

### 2. *Monism*

Scripture teaches emphatically that man is a whole body, mind, and spirit. It may be permissible to consider or treat one part of a man for particular purposes, but permanently to separate any part of our being is philosophically disastrous as well as theologically incompetent. It can be argued that our environmental troubles spring entirely from introducing distinctions where they do not exist (Browne, 1972); "dualism is the worst form of pollution" (R.H.L. Disney, *pers. comm.*). "Salvation is an ecological word in the sense that it is the restoration of a right relation which has been corrupted" (Sittler, 1970).

The evolution debate, rightly concluded, can show us how incomplete is our understanding of the immanence of God; likewise the environment debate should force us to examine some of our sacred cows of behaviour and make us whole persons as opposed to heterogeneous conglomerates. "The Gospel is to the technocrat foolishness and to the revolutionary it is a scandal" (Bishop Leslie Newbiggin). Christians who think of themselves as stewards of the mysteries of grace are, by the same dispensation, stewards of the realities of earth" (Sherwood Wirt, Editor of *Decision*).

One final quotation:

"The problem of the environment involves the salvation and enhancement of the positive values which man uses to develop

his humanness. It involves, ultimately, a social organization in which each person has much freedom in selecting the stage on which to act his life:

a peaceful village green  
the banks of a river  
the exciting plaza of a great city.

Survival is not enough.  
Seeing the Milky Way,  
experiencing the fragrance of spring  
and observing other forms of life

continue to play an immense role in the development of humanness. Man can use many different aspects of reality to make his life, not by imposing himself as a conqueror on nature, but by participating ... Otherwise man may be doomed to survive as something less than human". (René Dubos in *Life*)

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