

Ecological Confusion among the Clergy

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Clergy and religious organizations increasingly take positions on environmental policy issues. By adopting a deviation-from-pristine-nature standard for judging human stewardship, they believe an environmental crisis threatens God's good garden. They call for government and society at large to take extreme measures to protect ecosystems and to end timber harvesting on tens of millions of acres of public lands. Such calls are based on a poor understanding of environmental conditions and demonstrate little grasp of the current state of ecological science. Green-minded clerics seem to be unaware not only that ecologists have abandoned the notion of natural harmony and balance but that the concepts of the ecosystem, ecosystem sustainability, ecosystem health, and ecosystem integrity remain vague and controversial. It follows, therefore, that such ecological misunderstanding and theological confusion would result in misguided policy pronouncements.

Introduction

Increasingly, Judeo-Christian leaders and organizations take stands on United States public policy issues related to the environment, natural resources, and land use. Since God fashioned creation, they reason, it is sacred and must be protected. They argue that Americans sin by not adequately maintaining God's garden. Sinning takes many forms, but green-minded theologians routinely describe it in terms borrowed from ecological science. Sinful behavior occurs when the integrity, sustainability, and stability of ecosystems are negatively affected, or when conditions are created wherein the needs of ecosystems cannot be met, or when the presumed balance and harmony of nature are upset. The purpose of this article is to examine the use of ecological concepts among religious leaders in formulating environmental policy positions. My argument is that a faulty understanding of ecology often leads the clergy to make scientifically and theologically ill-informed public policy pronouncements. A striking example of this can be seen in an international effort by Catholic bishops regarding the watershed of the Columbia River, which, they allege, God intended to be a "sacramental commons."

The Standard of Judgment for Ecological Sin

The clerics' belief that we are in the grip of an ecological crisis leads them

to conclude that humankind's sinful behavior is destroying the garden. In 1991 two dozen representatives of Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, and Native American churches and organizations met in New York City to formulate a response to this environmental crisis. The meeting resulted in the "Statement by Religious Leaders at the Summit on Environment" (hereafter, the Summit Statement), which employed crisis language to describe the current state of the environment. Thus, according to the Summit Statement, "Almost daily, we note mounting evidence of environmental destruction ... what God made and held good is under assault. ..." ¹ The United States Catholic Conference (USCC) concurs with this assessment: "At its core, the environmental crisis is a moral challenge." ² Similarly, the National Council of Churches (NCC) finds that "God's creation is being abused and violated ... [that] we are killing the earth ... killing the waters ... killing the skies." ³ The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL) proclaims "the environmental crisis is a religious challenge." ⁴ The North American Coalition for Christianity and Ecology (NACCE) insists that "the ecological crisis and the host of actions contributing to it are best understood in the context of sin." Sinning occurs when people refuse "to act in the image of God" and thus do not "value and love the host of independent creatures in their ecosystems" as God does. People, they write, "relentlessly oppress the Earth and violate the integrity of creation." ⁵

These clerical cries of crisis do not pass ecological muster. First of all, neither the earth, the waters, nor the skies are living things in their own right, which means that humans cannot be killing them, as the NCC contends. More broadly, the landscape of the United States offers scant evidence of environmental meltdown. By nearly any objective indicator, the condition of the natural environment in the United States is good and getting better. Recent reports on air quality, water quality, forest growth, and many wildlife populations show a decrease in overall pollution levels, the repair of past environmental degradations, an increase in forest acreage, and a general abundance of wildlife. ⁶ While American stewardship of the environment is not perfect, it is wrong to claim that the country is in the grip of an environmental crisis.

If anyone is surprised to learn environmental that calamity is not imminent, it represents the triumph of a decades-long drumbeat of doomsday propaganda over actual scientific evidence. In a 1997 article titled "Environmental Scares: Plenty of Doom and Gloom," *The Economist* notes that "forecasters of scarcity and doom are ... invariably wrong." ⁷ Scholars at the nonpartisan Resources for the Future observe that in spite of protests by environmentalists, "more than a germ of truth exists in what *The Economist* has to say. As a matter of fact, the prophets of environmental doom do have a very bad record." ⁸ The

United States began to commit sizable societal resources long ago to environmental protection and clean-up. Americans have established the world's most comprehensive set of national, state, and local laws to protect the environment but, arguably, spend a larger share of our wealth for this purpose than any other nation.⁹ We have designated over 100 million acres as specially protected wilderness zones that prohibit nearly every human use. The General Accounting Office (GAO) reports that the amount of federal land managed primarily or exclusively for conservation purposes rose from 66 million acres in 1964 to 272 million acres in 1994.¹⁰ This figure exceeds the combined acreage of California, Florida, Indiana, Massachusetts, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina. Since the 1996 GAO report, preservation has become the chief management goal on several more million acres of federal land.

Even the oft-cited biodiversity crisis looks far less ominous when we consider the data. Researchers estimate the total number of species in the United States to range somewhere between 250,000 and 750,000.¹¹ The United States Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) lists 1,201 species as threatened or endangered.¹² If each of these species were to become extinct tomorrow, our total biological endowment would decline by less than one percent, which would be a disconcerting loss but would not constitute a crisis. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) estimates that since 1600, 109 species of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fishes, invertebrates, and vascular plants have become extinct in what is now the continental United States.¹³ Conversely, at least 4,500 non-indigenous species have established free-living populations in the United States over the past few hundred years so that, on balance, this part of the world has seen an increase in biological diversity.¹⁴ Suppose religious leaders are aware of this information but still proclaim the United States to be in the grip of an ecological crisis. This would mean that they use a different standard to measure environmental breakdown. What might it be?

Crisis-conscious theologians generally adopt a deviation-from-nature yardstick to judge human environmental stewardship. The further nature moves from its *pristine* state (meaning unaffected by human agency), the worse human stewardship is considered to be. "A disrupted nature," according to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA), "is a judgment on our unfaithfulness as stewards."¹⁵ Signatories of the Summit Statement insist that the environment is "what God made" and that "we must maintain it as we received it."¹⁶ The American Baptist Churches, USA, in their "Policy Statement on Ecology," conclude that "all life is to be honored and revered so that, among other things, our task as stewards is to increase justice and well-being

for all life....”¹⁷ Clergy fall prey to the deviation-from-nature standard of measurement by reasoning that creation belongs to God, which he declared to be good and sacred, thus human stewards of creation must strive to uphold, protect, and preserve the environment. According to the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN), God intended creation to be a “symphony of individual creatures in harmonious relationship.”¹⁸ The Summit Statement proclaims an “ever-increasing peril to ... whole ecosystems” and sees threats to “the integrity of natural ecosystems.”¹⁹ According to its signer, the “cause of environmental integrity and justice must occupy a position of utmost priority for people of faith.” The American Baptist Churches, USA, view proper stewardship as standing with “vulnerable creation” and devising “social systems that maintain the balance of nature.”²⁰

The deviation-from-nature standard undergirds policy statements. Rabbi David Saperstein, representing the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (consisting of the United States Catholic Conference, Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, National Council of Churches, and the Evangelical Environmental Network), told a congressional committee considering reform of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) that:

Every species is sacred. That we take as a matter of faith. To exterminate a species through actions, direct or indirect, results in us erasing a part of the sacred, stating through our actions that we know the value of the world better than does its Creator. When we destroy a species, we act against God....

And it is no small thing that we are invited, that we are called, to work as God's partner in tending God's exquisite garden....²¹

United Methodist minister Rev. Peter Moore-Kochlacs told Congress that the ESA must be strengthened because

humans, along with countless other species, belong to the land, to the habitat, to the web of life, to God.... Instead of earthkeeping we ... oppress the land, water, and air and endanger all the other creatures who look to us for compassion and justice.²²

The Christian Environmental Council's (CEC) “Resolution on Forest Ecosystems” encourages “all Christians to support and advocate the conservation of remaining forest ecosystems as natural communities....” The Council goes on to “advocate the end to all old growth logging of God's forest ecosystems in the United States ... and advocate the end of all commercial logging on United States National Forests ...” under the guise of protecting creation.²³ The Religious Campaign for Forest Conservation (RCFC) actively lobbies Congress to

end logging on all public lands.²⁴ The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, claiming we have a “sacred obligation to the Creator, to Creation, and to future generations to safeguard Earth’s ecosystems,” wants to end all logging in old growth forests and to add some forty million acres to the national wilderness system.²⁵ These religious leaders are lobbying to make the pristine-nature-is-ideal-and-sacred-so-it-must-be-protected interpretations of ecology and Scripture the basis of environmental public policy.

Does the Deviation-from-Natural-Conditions Standard Make Sense?

The deviation-from-natural-conditions standard used by religious leaders and organizations to condemn current human interaction with the environment raises several thorny questions. Does a garden exist now (or did one ever exist) that offers a normative benchmark against which to compare current landscapes for assessing human stewardship of creation? Is it possible to maintain the environment just as God gave it to us? Is nature balanced and harmonious? Can the idea of the sacredness of creation intelligently inform public policy? Do concepts of ecosystem sustainability, health, and integrity have sufficient scientific substance to serve as a basis for public policies? Each of these questions will be examined in turn.

Researchers agree that the earth is in constant flux, both with regard to space and time.²⁶ Most ecologists have jettisoned the concept of natural equilibria and accept that change is nature’s only constant.²⁷ Depending on the type of environmental alteration being discussed, such change may be measured in hours or days (as in weather), seasons (for the life of annual plants or movements of migratory animals), hundreds or thousands of years (climatic variation), millions of years (life of species), hundreds of millions of years (mountain building), or billions of years (overall development of the physical characteristics of the planet and evolution of life). Given the 4.5 billion-year history of the earth, no area of the planet is exactly the same today as it was in the past. Every patch of the earth has taken on dramatically different appearances at various periods and has witnessed an ever-shifting kaleidoscope of biota (with periods of complete lifelessness). The University of Maryland’s Mark Sagoff succinctly describes happenings on the land: “it is just one damned thing after another out there. Nature does not know ... and Nature does not care.”²⁸ In ecological terms, there is no idyllic garden, no particular mix of living and non-living things or conditions that can serve as a normative scientific template for a model landscape.

Faced with no help from science, theologians must inevitably turn to Scripture in their search for landscape norms. But, on this point, the Bible offers no

more understanding than the scientific establishment. Scripture passages are often used to support environmental theologians who fault present-day stewardship or see us in an environmental crisis. For example, many Scripture passages—2 Chronicles 7:14, 2 Chronicles 36:21, Genesis 9:9–17, Isaiah 11:6–9, Isaiah 24:4–6, Isaiah 65:17, 25; Jeremiah 2:7, Job 38–41, Psalm 24:1, Psalm 104, Colossians 1:15–20, 1 Corinthians 15:28, Ephesians 1:10, Romans 1:20, and Romans 8:19–22—speak of the relationship of humans to the land but do not present God’s idea of a normative landscape.²⁹ It makes sense that theologian Thomas Derr rightly cautions against presuming what God’s purposes are for nature: “We do not know, cannot know, and had better not claim that we know those purposes.”³⁰

By directly or indirectly favoring wilderness or natural landscapes, religious leaders assert a human, not a divine, preference. Biblical allusions to wilderness seem to appear when humankind violates the commandments, and, as punishment, God either destroys the land or exiles the people to wilderness areas. Isaiah tells us that “the Lord empties the land and lays it waste” (24:1), and “the earth is utterly laid waste, utterly stripped, for the Lord has decreed this thing” (24:3).³¹ The prophet goes on to say that “the earth is polluted because of its inhabitants, who have transgressed laws, violated statutes, broken the ancient covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants pay for their guilt” (24:56). God punished in this way, not because his children were poor stewards of the garden, but because they failed to obey his laws.³² Social ethicist Calvin Beisner observes that God did not tell man to protect the wilderness against the encroaching garden. He told man to protect the *garden* against the encroaching *wilderness*.³³ “It is simply wrong Biblically,” relates Beisner, “to assume that nature untouched by human hands is better than nature transformed by wise, godly human stewardship.”³⁴

In the absence of clear ecological or theological guidance regarding which landscapes offer a normative standard by which to judge human stewardship, clergy must create one themselves. To do so, they must isolate some moment in time to establish baseline conditions via a snapshot of the landscape. A map showing a single pattern of landscapes whose pictures are being taken must also be provided. They must offer a rationale for why the moment and pattern they chose should be considered a superior benchmark. Religious leaders appear to have done none of these things and thus offer the public no substantive defense in support of their position. By adopting some form of a variation-from-natural-conditions standard to measure contemporary environmental stewardship, these leaders embrace an arbitrary benchmark supported neither by science nor by Scripture.

But what about the argument for our responsibility to maintain creation just as God gave it to us? The Summit Statement insists that creation must be preserved in its original pristine state. But what does this mean from the perspectives of ecological science and theology? Since change characterizes the earth God made, it follows that humans cannot prevent variations to the landscape over time because natural forces vastly overpower our capabilities. We cannot halt the quiet evolution of new life forms or even stop bacteria from becoming resistant to antibiotics. We cannot halt climate change and the constant spatial redistribution of living things that it propels. Robert Royal, president of the Faith and Reason Institute, aptly summarizes the human inability to direct nature: "If we think that human beings are created in God's image and likeness and that God works through history, we will not be able to acquiesce in a steady-state view of nature that both revelation and scientific research have denied."³⁵ In the physical world, the notion of preserving creation in its original state lacks credibility, and those lobbying for policies to do so tout the absurd.

Environmental Buzzwords and Religious Leaders

How should we understand terms such as *balance*, *harmony*, *sacredness*, *sustainability*, *health*, and *integrity*, all of which frequently appear in the statements of crisis-oriented theologians? Do these concepts possess substantive scientific meaning or present an ecological norm or standard by which to measure human stewardship of creation? The answer to each of these questions is unequivocally negative.

The concepts of balance and harmony in nature have a lengthy history. Ecological historian Frank Egerton observes that Herodotus addressed these ideas as early as 450 B.C.³⁶ While these concepts may enjoy popular support in Disney movies, Saturday morning cartoons, and the pronouncements of environmental activists, politicians, and clergy, the scholarly community now considers them to be fictions. Egerton refers to "the balance of nature myth."³⁷ Ecologists Stewart Pickett, Jurek Kolasa, and Clive Jones remark that the balance of nature is not a scientific theory or concept.³⁸ Scholars abandoned the equilibrium paradigm (which gave scientific support to the balance of nature idea) decades ago after study upon study demonstrated that it did not exist.³⁹ A report done for the Ecological Society of America found that "empirical studies have increasingly demonstrated either a lack of equilibrium or equilibrium conditions that are only observed at particular scales of time and space."⁴⁰ Theologians Thomas Derr and James Nash, who frequently disagree on the proper relation between humans and the environment, nonetheless concur that viewing nature as har-

monious and peaceful is a romantic and sentimental illusion.⁴¹ Ecologist Dan Botkin argues that acceptance of the discredited “classic balance of nature” view, in which “the idea that nature, undisturbed by human influences, is constant and that this constancy is desirable and good—and the best possible condition for all life,” underlies many environmental conflicts.⁴² When clergy invoke the ideas of natural balance and harmony in the environmental debate, they perpetuate ecological ignorance and put the credibility of their denominations behind pseudo-scientific concepts. By pleading for legislation that will restore balance and harmony to the landscape, these officials petition government to use its power to do the impossible. Government cannot protect what does not (and cannot) exist. Such misguided efforts waste precious human and fiscal resources and detract from our ability to craft better environmental policies.

Debates over the sacredness of creation continue to rage centuries after they began, with no closure in sight. Nevertheless, from a policy standpoint, it is important to make a few observations with respect to the issue. In Genesis, God refers to all of pre-human creation as good, which includes living and non-living things as well as the physical, chemical, and biological processes that sustain it (Gen. 1:4, 1:10, 1:12, 1:18, 1:21, and 1:25). If God’s declaration is what bestows sacredness on a thing, then there is no compelling theological reason to confine reverence of creation merely to living things. Consequently, the category of sacredness must logically extend to dirt, rocks, mountains, rivers, erosion, gravity, and so on. Furthermore, sacredness must extend not only to those things that sustain life but to natural phenomena such as floods, earthquakes, climatic variation, and disease organisms that can cause human death and destruction. Was the meteor that struck the earth 65 million years ago off the Yucatan Peninsula causing the extinction of countless thousands of species sacred? As I write this, massive flooding is wreaking havoc on most living things in Mozambique. Yet if we bestow sacredness on all facets of creation, then those waters must be hallowed, along with the creatures (including people) whose bodies float quietly out to sea.

The enhancement of human well-being requires manipulating the environment, as with protecting people against floods. Human actions inevitably improve conditions for some biota while they adversely affect others. How can environmental public policies be evaluated adequately by appealing to the sacredness of creation? If everything is sacred, then it becomes impossible to introduce economies of scale, for sacredness does not come in degrees. There is no formula that enables policy makers to make objective comparisons between a policy that may harm ten species but would help seven against a policy that would aid nine but harm three.

Religious leaders create even greater confusion when they call upon government to protect ecosystems, which are nothing more than artificial human constructs. For example, the Summit Statement declares that there is “mounting evidence of environmental destruction and ever-increasing peril to ... whole ecosystems.” The Summit Statement assume ecosystems are real entities created by God. They believe that humans threaten “the integrity of natural ecosystems.”

God does not create ecosystems; people do. Ecosystems do not exist in nature as distinct or discrete units; they are solely fabrications of the human mind.⁴³ As researchers Lawrence Kapustka and Wayne Landis put it, “no human has ever seen an ecosystem.”⁴⁴ Sir Arthur Tansley coined the term *ecosystem* in 1935 to help remove his colleagues from years of unproductive debates about plant communities.⁴⁵ Yet, after more than half a century of dominance in graduate schools, researchers cannot agree on such elementary matters as ecosystem classification, an ecosystem map for any part of the world, and the means of determining spatial boundaries between ecosystems. Ecologist Simon Levin writes, “what we call an ecosystem ... is really just an arbitrary subdivision of a continuous gradation in local species assemblages.”⁴⁶ The so-called Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE), for example, can range anywhere from five to twenty million acres, depending on the map that is consulted. Scientists lack any theory or protocol for determining the shape, size, or location of ecosystems, which means that ecosystem maps depict nothing more than idiosyncratic slices of the landscape.

Clergy routinely appeal to the concepts of ecosystem (or ecological) sustainability, health, and integrity, in the belief that these are well-attested scientific phenomena. Yet precisely the opposite is true. These terms function as part of a political, not scientific, vocabulary. Ecological sustainability, health, and integrity do not constitute inherent properties of any landscape; however, because humans superimpose these properties onto their original construct—the ecosystem—it should not be surprising that debate rages over their meaning, measure, and value. Nels Johnson of the World Resources Institute observes that “sustainability is in the eye of the beholder.”⁴⁷ As a practical matter, the notion of a sustainable ecosystem is an oxymoron. Writing for the Ecological Society of America, Christensen *et al.* note that “ecosystems are dynamic in space and time ... [they] are constantly changing.”⁴⁸ Ecological historian Donald Worster believes that “we must conceive of ecosystems then, not as permanent entities engraved on the face of the earth but as shifting patterns in the endless flux, always new, always different.”⁴⁹ Such views represent current ecological

orthodoxy. But how can the concept of sustainability have cogent meaning when the entity to which it applies is constantly changing?

The editors of the book *Ecosystem Health* write that there is no “clear concept of the term” *ecosystem health* and that it and *ecological integrity* “have never been defined well enough to make them useful in policy documents.”⁵⁰ Health is an attribute of living things. By employing agreed-upon norms, doctors know when an organism is dead, alive, sick, or wounded. But an ecosystem should not be thought of as some sort of superorganism that seeks to perpetuate itself over time and through space.⁵¹ No matter how one defines it, the GYE is not sentient. Researchers cannot find a central GYE decision-making structure anywhere in the forests, meadows, mountains, lakes, or rivers of the ecosystem. Because ecosystems do not live, there are no norms concerning their health.⁵² Where one ecosystem doctor may perceive sickness, another may perceive robustness. It is not surprising, then, that ecologist Peter Calow of Sheffield University finds that “the definition of [ecosystem] health ... has proved somewhat elusive.”⁵³ After reviewing efforts by his colleagues to define ecosystem health, David Rapport writes that there “are a plethora of attempts to define ecosystem health ... [that] range widely from very broad definitions which incorporate biophysical, human, and socioeconomic components to those focusing primarily on the biophysical aspects to definitions that focus on a single indicator within the biophysical domain.”⁵⁴ Furthermore, he observes that there is no consistency in how researchers measure ecosystem health. Three years after his initial report, Rapport finds that “the question of what constitutes ecosystem health remains somewhat perplexing and controversial.”⁵⁵ (Interestingly, Rapport strongly supports making the protection of ecosystem health the basis of environmental policies.) Due to its ambiguity, then, the concept of ecosystem health cannot help to inform public policy discussions.

The notion of ecological integrity is also vague. Some ecologists think that ecosystem integrity depends on ecosystem health, while others make the opposite case, basing health on integrity. Moreover, some claim that less human impact on the environment means greater integrity, though others reject linking integrity with pristineness.⁵⁶ Some researchers tie integrity to the structural aspects of ecosystems, while others opt for a more functional approach, and still others blend the two.⁵⁷

The concept of an ecosystem and its attendant ideas of sustainability, health, and integrity remain mired in confusion and uncertainty. Writing in 1990, ecologist Robert Peters concludes that “to many contemporary ecologists the weakness of ecology is patent and needs little elaboration.”⁵⁸ He sees “lack of scientific rigor,” “weak predictive capacity,” “lack of testable theory,” and “a

tendency of ecologists to demagoguery and polemics” as major difficulties, along with the fact that ecosystem ecology contains “many constructs of dubious merit.” A decade after Peters’s study, fisheries biologist Robert Lackey notes that “there continues to be a wide range of opinion amid much bewilderment about the meaning and implications of such terms as ecosystem health, ecological integrity, sustainability, and biological diversity.”⁵⁹

When religious leaders employ such tenuous concepts in their proclamations, they align themselves with nebulous ideas for which ecologists provide no agreed-upon definitions or measures. Moreover, it is unclear in what way these concepts contribute productively to discussions of human environmental stewardship. The Ten Commandments describe God’s understanding of human sin. Thus it is clear what “Thou shall not steal” means; the prohibition does not need legions of scholars to explain it. On the other hand, no amount of theological or ecological study can impart any clear meaning for admonitions such as “Thou shall not harm an ecosystem’s health or integrity,” or “Thou shall not disturb the balance of nature.” None of the previously mentioned terms provides a coherent vocabulary for political discussion of environmental issues, or for efforts to shape societal views regarding proper stewardship of the garden.

With this as background, I will now examine the position of religious leaders on land management policy. Consequently, my focus for the remainder of the paper will be on the “The Columbia River Watershed: Realities and Possibilities” (the Reflection), an international reflection written by the Catholic bishops of the region.⁶⁰

The Columbia River Watershed: Realities and Possibilities

In 1997, Catholic bishops, whose districts encompass the Columbia River watershed in the United States and Canada, began a coordinated effort to examine problems within it. In May of 1999 they issued the Reflection, which was addressed “to our Catholic community and to all people of good will.”⁶¹ The intent of the document is to persuade the appropriate governmental bodies to take environmental action with respect to the region. Close analysis of the document reveals that it would not function as a useful guide for environmental policy since it is grounded in dubious ecological science. The Reflection, along with statements by mainline religious organizations, helps legitimize the effort by radical environmentalists to quarantine additional lands from human use and to prevent the legitimate use of natural resources to enhance human well-being.⁶²

In the Reflection, ecological misunderstanding appears immediately. The

bishops begin by stating that “the Columbia watershed is an extensive ecosystem which recognizes no national, state or provincial borders. It is part of God’s creation, transcending humanity’s arbitrary political boundaries.” They assume that watersheds, as geographic units, have some special ecological or theological significance when compared to political regions. But, in fact, they do not. As a general rule, we cannot explain the distributions of living things by looking at watersheds. When locating a home, most biota pay no more attention to watershed boundaries than they do to state lines; moreover, spatial patterns of physical components of the environment such as soils, precipitation, or temperature cannot be explained or predicted by looking at watersheds.⁶³ Matters fare no better from the human side, as watersheds have virtually no effect on human economic, social, and political activities. The bishops draw their ecosystem boundary based on a single spatial variable, surface drainage, to the exclusion of all other landscape components. They may put the border of their ecosystem any place they wish—that is, after all, the nature of ecosystem boundaries—but they fail to recognize that their arbitrary boundary merely encloses an idiosyncratic ecosystem of their own design; they have not identified a discrete organized entity created by God.

Having fashioned their own object, the bishops then endow it with a variety of attributes whose protection they want to make an integral part of political action within the region. Throughout the Reflection, the bishops attribute to the Columbia River ecosystem the nebulous qualities of sustainability, health, and integrity. They also say their ecosystem has “needs.”⁶⁴ People must develop “a new ecological consciousness and ... a new conscientious attitude of care for the needs of all creation, living and nonliving” in the bishops’ opinion.⁶⁵ To do so, we must “develop an integrated plan for adapting human requirements to the needs and processes of the ecosystem” and use resources “in ways consonant with ecosystem rhythms and needs.”⁶⁶ But the fact remains: living things have needs; nonliving things (such as ecosystems) do not. What do rocks, mountains, or lakes need? To claim that the landscape abstraction of ecosystems has identified its own needs, as the bishops do, makes no more sense than claiming an automobile can identify its needs. Your car does not sit in the driveway thinking it needs an oil change or new spark plugs (you may think your car needs servicing, but that is a different matter altogether). Likewise, the Columbia River basin ecosystem (or watershed) does not monitor recent precipitation amounts and find that it needs more rain. It does not tally resident species and conclude that it has too many or too few of them. It does not know or care about declining salmon or spotted owl populations or the

acreage in what is known as old growth timber. It lacks any awareness at all of human activities or even of human presence.

Ecological science offers no support for the bishops' position regarding ecosystem needs because ecosystems are not living entities. As ecologists Kapustka and Landis write, "ecological systems are not alive and properties associated with living systems should not be attributed to them."⁶⁷ Christensen *et al.* remark that "a dung pile or whale carcass are ecosystems as much as a watershed or a lake."⁶⁸ Does anyone consider dung piles living things? What might their rhythms and needs be? When a whale carcass washes up on the beach, no one seriously entertains the possibility that it is alive or rushes to care for its needs. By urging the public to make changes in their lives to accommodate nonexistent ecosystem needs, one wonders if the bishops are beginning inadvertently to make an idol out of their own creation, what they call the Columbia Basin ecosystem.

The more one examines the bishops' statement, the more mystifying it becomes. They write: "the well-being of the salmon is a sign of ... the spiritual vitality of the watershed."⁶⁹ What can this mean? Why salmon, as opposed to one or more of the thousands of other species in the watershed? How can the non-thinking, non-knowing, non-living watershed have spiritual vitality in the first place? Was the spiritual vitality of the watershed good before the salmon became part of the biological community? If the declining salmon populations rebound dramatically but the Douglas fir suffers a massive die-off, would the spiritual vitality of the watershed decline or improve?

The Reflection contains high-sounding but fundamentally empty language, such as the watershed being a "sacramental commons" complete with "living water." The bishops write:

The Columbia watershed should have *living water* (John 4:7), in a physical and spiritual sense:

- Water that is flowing pure;
- Water that reveals God's creative work;
- Water that symbolizes God's presence in our midst;
- Water that is a sign of God's grace showered upon us.

The Columbia watershed should be sacramental. It should reveal God's loving creativity in its diversity of creatures, topography and people, and its ability to provide food and shelter for its inhabitants. The eyes of faith should see signs of the Spirit in this book of nature, signs that complement the understandings of God revealed in the books of the Bible. The Columbia watershed should also be a commons: a place shared by all the members of the community of life (what scientists call the *biotic community*), where their respective food and habitat needs are integrated.

The Columbia watershed, then, is intended by God to be a sacramental commons.⁷⁰

The bishops use John 4:7 and Revelation 22 to buttress their claim that the watershed should contain “living water.”⁷¹ John 4:7 recounts the story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. In conversation with the woman, Jesus says, “If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” Jesus goes on to say a few verses later, “Everyone who drinks this water [from Jacob’s well] will be thirsty again; but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” As the compilers of the *New American Bible* explain, while the woman may be thinking of flowing water, Jesus’ reference to living water means the “revelation that Jesus brings.”⁷² In Revelation 22:1–2, John writes, “the angel showed me a river of life-giving water, sparkling like crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the street.” Like John 4:7, this reference to living water has nothing to do with clear-running rivers. It refers instead to “God’s grace, which flows from Christ.”⁷³

The bishops delineate four characteristics of “living water” they wish to be present in future human stewardship of the Columbia River basin: “pure flowing water, water that reveals God’s creative work, water that symbolizes God’s presence in our midst, and water that is a sign of God’s grace showered upon us.”⁷⁴ Such phrases cry out for explanation. What is pure flowing water? If the bishops mean pure water in the sense that only water molecules will be found in stream channels, then that is a physical impossibility. If they mean a stream without signs of human effects, that is also impossible. There is no reason to categorize (as the bishops appear to do) human-induced stream changes as harmful impurities that desecrate the garden. A member of a declining salmon stock would likely share the bishops’ view, but representatives from species benefiting from such changes such as largemouth bass, bluegill, and yellow perch would not.

The bishops do not specify under what conditions water reveals God’s creative work, symbolizes the divine presence among us, or serves as a sign of grace. They do not describe the settings under which it fails to perform these functions, but the subtext of their message is that the more natural the river, the more likely it is to possess their approved attributes. Yet why should this be the case, for as I showed earlier in the article, neither science nor Scripture lead to such a conclusion?

Furthermore, the bishops fail to address clearly the issue of when a landscape is

sacramental and when it is not. They do provide a list of four characteristics the watershed must have to be sacramental. But these characteristics are vague and immeasurable: “a sign of God’s creativity, a revelation of God’s presence, an occasion of grace and conveyor of God’s blessing, [and] a bearer of holy waters, waters blessed by God as good.”⁷⁵ The bishops must define precisely what they mean by these phrases. What, for example, are “holy waters, waters blessed by God”? Who says that God has not blessed the Columbia River and all its tributaries as they presently exist? What standards do these religious leaders employ to reach their conclusions? The sad reality is that the Reflection utilizes vague and poorly defined ecological concepts that are controversial at best, and, at worst, are largely rejected by the scientific establishment.

Unfortunately, the bishops’ ecological confusion leads them to endorse one of the more outlandish (from a Christian point of view) elements of environmentalist thought, that of speciesism. Peter Singer, the controversial Australian philosopher and champion of animal rights, coined the term *speciesism* in 1973. He defines it as “a prejudice or attitude of bias toward members of other species.”⁷⁶ Beisner puts Singer’s case opposing speciesism as follows:

Singer builds his whole argument ... against speciesism on the assumption of essential equality between human and other life forms, an equality as morally significant as the equality of Blacks and Whites and of men and women. If the fundamental equality of Blacks and Whites makes racism immoral, and the fundamental equality of men and women makes sexism immoral, then the fundamental equality of humans and other animals makes speciesism immoral.⁷⁷

For the bishops, speciesism is the attitude that “one’s own ... species is superior to, independent of, and has the right to dominate another ... species to satisfy ones needs and wants.”⁷⁸ The bishops list speciesism as one of four “evils” in the watershed, with the others being racism, sexism, and classism. Although they proclaim speciesism, like the other “isms,” to be individual, communal, and structural sin, they never develop or explain this statement in any depth.

It escapes me how one could reconcile the bishops’ position with Scripture’s description of the place of humans and nature. God rather unequivocally places humans, which he created in his own image, atop nature and places nature under human stewardship chiefly for the purpose of advancing human well-being.⁷⁹ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* emphasizes these points:

The *hierarchy of creatures* is expressed by the order of the six days, from the less perfect to the more perfect. God loves all his creatures [citing Psalm 149:9] and takes care of each one, even the sparrow. Nevertheless, Jesus

said: You are of more value than many sparrows [citing Luke 12:6-7], or again: Of how much more value is a man than a sheep [citing Matthew 12:12]!

Man is the summit of the Creator's work, as the inspired account expresses by clearly distinguishing the creation of man from that of other creatures [citing Genesis 1:26].⁸⁰

The *Catechism* goes on to say, "God created everything for man...."⁸¹ The Reflection's ecological incoherence and confused theological framework render the document of little real value as a guide for the faithful in the region.

Conclusion

If religious leaders wish to weigh in on land management and environmental policy matters, then they need to get the science right, understand the actual conditions of the landscape, and resist the urge to speak in slogans and empty phrases. They must be careful not to flirt inadvertently with nature worship masquerading as science-driven care for God's creation. Uncritical acceptance of secular environmental rhetoric and repetition of exaggerated cries of ecological crisis by religious leaders do nothing to enhance human stewardship of creation, to improve human dignity, or to save souls. In summary, Father Robert Sirico, president of the Acton Institute, correctly comments:

In highly politicized times like ours, it is common to see secular political trends reflected in subtle changes in the doctrine and practices of mainstream religions ... there exists the ever-present danger that the Church can be driven less by a concern for applying teachings arrived at independently of a political setting, but instead reflect a desire to fit in with and be relevant to public life ... but in this case, political activism can actually represent a threat to the fundamental truths of faith.... I believe that this is the case with much of the environmental spirituality that seems to be making huge inroads into contemporary religious circles.⁸²

Notes

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