

Creation Theology and Human Responsibility for Conservation An Episcopal Understanding

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The Ecological Crisis and Christian Response: an Overview

The earth is in crisis. It is nearly inconceivable that an educated person could be unaware of the disastrous impact of industrialization and the population explosion of the past century and a half. What began as a slow degradation of the environment has increased alarmingly in the past twenty years. Massive deforestation, especially of tropical rain forests, and fossil fuel-burning, among other causes, is resulting in an alarming warming of the atmosphere after hundreds of years of slow-rate cooling. We are experiencing, today, a melting of glaciers and the polar icecaps, which is gradually raising the sea level, thus encroaching upon the landmasses. The global warming is a direct cause of the increase in hurricane activity. In short, we are making a mess of our environment and recovery from it will be very difficult.

There are more ecological problems, unfortunately. In a nutshell, we have seriously harmed the biomass through over-consumption of desirable species of fish, tropical rain forests, and the conversion of temperate and tropical forests often into less-than-productive farmland or pasture. We have polluted the air with toxic metals, other industrial dusts and carbon monoxide to the point that in some cities, like Calcutta and Mexico City, the air can be a killer. We have polluted our lakes, rivers and oceans. We are in real danger of a catastrophic reduction in bio-diversity.

One would expect Christians to view this as a grave matter of moral concern. After all, we believe that the "Earth is the Lord's, for he made it." Tragically, conservative Christianity is one of the chief enemies of conservation efforts. This paper explores the Christian doctrine of creation, as expressed in Genesis and seeks to reconcile Christian belief with contemporary scientific understanding. Intelligent Christianity and modern science should be complementary. They should be allies in the fight to save the planet. There is no contradiction between moderate Christianity and science. The conflict between science and theology increases in direct proportion to increasing degree of Christian fundamentalism.

Two Science Doctrines: The Basis of Fundamentalist Aversion

There are two science theories widely accepted by educated people. The first is the theory of universe's birth. This theory is known as the "big bang." The other theory is evolution. Though widely accepted, there is recent and emerging data suggesting that the big bang is much more complicated than we have thought. It appears possible that there

are multiple universes, perhaps caused by multiple cataclysmic explosions, or perhaps collisions. Regardless, it all had to start somewhere. Before the first, there had to be nothing. However, scientists and educators face a real problem in teaching these theories because of the unreasonable hostility of some religious people and religious groups who believe that theories like big bang and evolution contradict the Bible. Many fundamentalist Christians insist that “Young Earth Creationism” is the only explanation true Christians can hold. Some conservative Christians, recognizing the difficulties with creationism, offer an explanation known as “Intelligent Design.” The problem with both of these explanations is the assumption that the Bible is the ultimate measure of natural knowledge, something it has never been and never can be.

Before discussing these science theories and the Genesis creation myths, it is important to emphasize that faith has nothing to fear from science. If, theologically, we define God as being ultimate truth, then in seeking God we are seeking truth. It is when we shut out truth for fear of what we will find that faith crumbles.

The Big Bang

Aside from emerging suggestions that the big bang was far more complex than science previously imagined, we still know, from substantial and sophisticated observation, that universe is so enormous that it is difficult for the human mind to grasp. *USA Today* ran an article on March 17, 2006, reporting the latest finding from a NASA satellite. The data suggest that our universe grew from the size of a marble to billions of light years across in the first trillionth of a second after its cataclysmic birth. This finding, based on data from the Wilkinson Microwave Anisotropy Probe (WMAP) satellite, supports a two-decade old physics theory called “inflation,” which describes how the cosmos grew over 13.7 billion years from a subatomic flicker into a vast expanse of stars and galaxies. In this universe, there are no ups or downs, no center, no edges. Emerging science suggests multiple dimensions beyond human experience. Science says that the universe has been expanding for almost 14 billion years, from this event that we call the “big bang.” From that event, space, time and various forms of matter and energy emerged. Billions of galaxies, each with billions of stars and innumerable planets, have come into existence. Many have also disappeared into eternally dark black holes since the beginning of the universe. Is this concept contrary to Christian understanding? No, not if you posit that God was the primal or first cause, or, to use the “vernacular,” God lit the firecracker. In fact, as we shall see, big bang theory fits perfectly with the Judeo/Christian understanding that God created the universe from nothing and that creation is a continuing process.

Darwin and Evolution

Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution is well over a century old. Nothing has been more debated (and scientifically examined), nothing has set more Christian’s teeth on edge, than the proposition that humanity descended from apes. Yet, the work of anthropologists, biologists, fossil discovery and any other number of scientific efforts have continually reinforced Darwin’s theory. Evolution is reality. We are, indeed,

descended from apes. All living things have evolved from earlier life forms. Evolution theory teaches us that all life is related and that evolution happens because of natural selection. The overwhelming scientific evidence is in the fossil records, biogeography and genetics. Is this contrary to biblical statements about humanity being created in the image of God, or that God is the author of all life? The answer is that there is no contradiction. First of all, “image of God” is a theological notion about our ability to know things, to enter into intimate relationships with God, other humans and with all of creation. Saying that God created does not bind us into saying how God created. It is well within the boundaries of Christian understanding to state that at the moment of creation, God directed and called into existence an evolving cosmos, which includes life. In calling creation into existence, God programmed creation for on-going evolution. The Judeo/Christian understanding of the universe is that creation is teleological. This means that there is purposeful development, and that the universe is unfolding into its ultimate design and purpose, as stipulated by God. The theological truth is that God is the author of creation and the teleological end represents his holy will.

Conservative and Fundamentalist Christian Understandings of Creation

Very conservative and fundamentalist Christians insist that the creation stories in Genesis represent scientific fact, even though the two creation accounts are mutually exclusive. Today’s fundamentalists are proponents of a view called Young Earth Creationism.” This view holds that God created both the earth and the cosmos in six twenty-four hour days, as related in the first of the two Genesis creation accounts. Fundamentalist Christians go on, from there, to blend the two stories into a homogenous whole. They insist that the earth’s creation happened some 6,000 years ago, accepting as factual the chronology of Irish Archbishop James Ussher (1581- 1656), who dated creation to October 23rd, 4004 BCE. Young Earth Creationists insist that there is scientific evidence to back up their interpretation of the Bible. However, they categorically reject anything that does not fit their interpretation. Their approach to understanding is, “God said it. I believe it. That settles it!” They discount all scientific discoveries regarding the age of the universe and evidence of evolution, not only because they believe it contradicts the Bible, but because they also believe that evolution theory is the cause of changes in modern society harmful to Christian morality.

Other conservative Christians, though somewhat less fundamentalist in their thinking, are proponents of a creation concept known as Intelligent Design. They believe that it is possible to scientifically discover the actions of God in nature. They also claim that living creatures are far too complex to have evolved naturally. Therefore, the universe and life can only be explained by the direct action of an “intelligent designer.” Proponents of Intelligent Design equate evolution with “naturalism,” and claim that naturalism denies the existence of God. They assert that God designed the universe and steps in, from time to time, to fix errant wanderings and keep things moving along in the right way.

The Limitations of Holy Scripture

Episcopalians, and most moderate and well-educated Christians, consider the Bible to be inspired but not infallible or inerrant. Episcopalians, as a matter of doctrine, believe that the Bible “contains all things necessary to salvation,” being an authoritative source of truth about God, Christ and the Christian life. However, Episcopalians do not believe that the Bible contains all truth about God; neither does it contain all truth about everything else. In other words, as a source of knowledge and authority, the Bible is limited. It has competency to speak about human experiences of the nature of God and the relationship between God and humanity, but not the sciences. We discover scientific knowledge about God’s universe through nature, not scripture.

Episcopal theologians speak of the religious journey as “faith seeking understanding.” Refusing the application of intelligence, education and logic to biblical writings does not strengthen faith. We ask science to observe our universe and tell us what it finds. We can then reflect on those findings, in the light of religious doctrine, to give those findings meaning. It is in this way that we achieve understanding. We profitably think of theology and science as sister assets in our quest for knowledge. We must work with both to have true knowledge of our environment and our rightful place in our environment.

Ancient writers tried to explain their natural observation in terms that made sense to themselves. Their explanations reflect the myths of primitive people. They used concepts that made sense in their world, not ours. Their general observations about a creative and loving God continue to stand the test of time over hundreds of generations, but their scientific observations have been replaced with more modern understandings. This is an ongoing process. The Bible’s theological declarations about God and creation remain true throughout time, because these theological declarations are not dependent upon the ancient worldview in which they first appeared.

The Bible should be understood as one of three equal and balanced sources of Christian authority. The others are tradition and reason. We can understand Christian authority as a “three-legged milking stool.” Remove one of the legs and you’ll spill the milk. However, most Episcopalians acknowledge a “primacy of scripture,” believing that nothing should be understood as necessary to salvation that is not contained in scripture.

While Episcopalians acknowledge scripture as divinely inspired, we do not consider it to be without error. In other words, we reject categorically the religious conservative idea of the inerrancy of Holy Scripture. Biblical writings were susceptible to the understandings and worldviews of ancient writers, as well as their moral judgments and values. The Bible was not faxed from heaven, nor did the Holy Spirit whisper into the ears of its compilers. Much of the biblical material had earlier, oral sources. The stories are many-times filtered by human understanding through the process of telling and retelling. It is one thing to say that the works are inspired; it is a much different thing to insist that God is author and final editor, therefore the Bible is inerrant. The Bible is a collection of observations about God, made by humans, over several thousand years of history. Even within the Bible, there is an evolving understanding of the world and of God.

Genesis, Creation and Stewardship – Our Moral Responsibility for Conservation

The biblical creation stories are myth. When many people hear the word “myth,” they think “fable.” The idea of biblical myth being untrue is foreign to theologians. Myth is not history, but it represents and conveys a truth that cannot be expressed historically. The creation myths are campfire myths, folk understandings of ancient people. The myths of the Hebrews predate the migration of Israelites into Palestine by at least a thousand years. In other words, these stories are somewhere around forty-five hundred to five thousand years old. They could be even older. Scholars have been able to trace them back to Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent. These stories are more than stories. The ancients combined them with ritual, in sacred or cultic places and, in telling and acting out the stories, they experienced communion with God.

The creation myths were brought to Palestine by the Israelites when they occupied the land. The myths were further developed, colored and influenced by the myths of earlier occupants of the land, especially the Canaanites, and those who came after the Israelites, the Philistines. The ancient Jews gradually developed these stories, in terms of their religious understanding, over a period of at least a thousand years, and the stories reflect an emerging theology of God.

The Creation Myths in Genesis and Their Meanings

In Genesis, there are two separate creation stories, derived from three different sources. There is a gulf of time between the two stories. There is also a diversity of understanding, even a diversity of intent in recording them.

Genesis 1:1 – 2:4 is known as the priestly creation story. It is more theological doctrine than true myth, although this concept of creation has Mesopotamian roots that predate the Hebrew work. It is the later of the two creation stories, being compiled after the Babylonian exile. The priestly material, known to scholars as the “P” source, was compiled from earlier written and oral material sometime around 500 BCE. The priests had an agenda, which included establishing the divine origin of the Sabbath by including it as part of creation. This account is often described as emphasizing God’s transcendence or otherness, whereas the second and earlier account emphasizes God’s intimate relationship with creation.

The priestly account teaches that God called the universe into existence, and all of creation responds to God’s call. Creation is both complete and continuing. It is complete in the sense that God fully established it in the beginning. It is continuing in that it is always moving towards the fullness of God’s will. The ancient Hebrew priests taught that it is the essence of the nature of God to be creating; thus, he sustains creation. Were he ever to stop sustaining creation, the universe would immediately return to its preexistent chaos. This concept is known, theologically, as *creatio continua*, which means that creation is moving forward in accordance with God’s will and is sustained

through God's Word and Holy Spirit. This is particularly important for Christians, who believe that God's creating word became incarnate in Jesus. Christians understand the Christ as the creating aspect of God. We acknowledge this each time we say the Nicene Creed, "We believe in one lord, Jesus Christ ... through whom all things were made."

The P account also tells us that God created out of nothing, *creatio ex nihilo*. The priestly understanding was that before the world existed, the universe was in a state of watery chaos. The Israelites had a great fear of the ocean. The worst thing that they could imagine was having the earth overcome by the waters of the sea.

As stated, above, the P account tells us that God created by his Word. "God said, let there be light, and there was light." This vocalization, by God's word, into being is one part of a three-part formula repeated after the various parts of creation. God said, "Let there be," and when it came into being he gave the created thing a name, thereby claiming authority over it. Next, God declared the results of his work to be "good." There are six separate segments in the priestly account of creation, each requiring one twenty-four hour day.

The order of creation is as follows: 1st day, light was created; the light and the darkness are separated from each other, named and declared good. On the 2nd day, what the King James Version (KJV) calls "the firmament," meaning, "vault," was created. God named the vault "heaven." The sole purpose of this vault or "heaven" was to separate the earth from the waters above it. The priestly concept of earth is a flat plate, floating on the waters below it. Picture a dinner plate floating on the waters of chaos, with a domed vault over the earth-plate to protect the earth from the waters of chaos above. On the 3rd day, God created the dry land and collected the waters under the vault, or "heaven" into one place (the ancient Israelites' only awareness of the sea was the Mediterranean). God did this in order to protect the earth by separating it from the sea. God called the dry land good. On the same 3rd day, God also created vegetation, in two parts. The first part was plants bearing seed; the second part was trees bearing fruit. The emphasis is on the seed as the reproductive aspect of nature, a continuing manifestation of the creating power of God. On the 4th day, God created the greater and lesser lights in the vault, or "heaven," and called them good. On the 5th day, God created countless living creatures plus the sea monsters and every kind of bird to fly about in the heaven, and he called them good. At this point in the myth's sequence, something new is added. God ordered these living creatures to be "fruitful and multiply," which again should be understood as a continuing manifestation of the creative power of God, but a part of the creative power is now manifest within the creatures. On the 6th day, God created all the kinds of cattle, reptiles and wild animals, each made according to its specie, and declared them good. On this same day, he created man and woman, separately, but at the same time. In the priestly account, woman is equal with man and not a sub-creature of man. God said to the humans, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and rule over the earth," giving humanity responsibility over all the plants and the animals of the earth. This "ruling" over the earth and its plants and animals was understood as having responsibility for the care and maintenance of them, as well as the use of the plants for food. The use of animals for food was not, at first, intended by God, according to Genesis. This allowance came after

the flood. After the creation of humanity, God looked over all his creation and declared it to be “very good.”

The Priestly Account and Modern Science

Does big bang cosmology prove the doctrine of creation out of nothing? No, but it is not inconsistent with either the theological notion of continuing creation or creation out of nothing. As far as continuing creation goes, big bang theory affirms an evolving creation, because big bang posits an evolving and expanding universe. The priestly account does assume that all life was created at once and in its final form, and has not evolved. But, the Bible is not science and the priestly account of creation cannot be considered a valid explanation of the universe. The weight of scientific evidence to the contrary is overwhelming. What we must also understand is human creation *imago dei*, or in the image of God, is an important *theological notion* referring to our ability to be in relationship with other humans and with God. It refers, also, to our ability to discern right from wrong and make moral choice, our ability to be creative and our ability to love. It refers, even more, to our stewardship responsibility as agents of God, dwelling in his domain. These are the things that, even imperfectly, set us apart from the rest of the animal world. To think that these gifts have been bestowed through the evolutionary process does not conflict with biblical and theological notions that God is the creator.

Episcopal theologians understand God as the primary cause and understand him as continuing to create through the secondary causes of natural laws, ensuring regularity and reliability in nature. We understand God as having given creation all the powers and capacities necessary to organize and transform itself, in accordance with God’s will, at the moment of creation. In an evolving universe, God does not dictate the outcome of nature’s activities, but allows the world to become what it is able to become in its diversity. God gives all creation the freedom to be. We can say that in creating the universe, God did not so much have a fixed plan as a purpose. Creation is continuing and teleological, that is, it is continually moving towards God’s purpose, but in freedom of being.

God can be described as being “in, with and under” the natural processes of chance and natural selection. God allows random genetic mutations to ensure variety, resilience, novelty and freedom in the world. At the same time, his natural laws ensure regularity and reliability in nature.

The Priestly Account and Moral Considerations for Conservation

Creation is not an emanation from God, nor is it a reflection of his divine nature. Rather, creation is a product of God’s will, by his Word. Because God is the creator, the world wholly belongs to God. He is its Lord. This notion is essential in understanding humanity’s stewardship responsibility.

God, the creator, has declared each element of his creation to be “*tob*,” or “good.” This is not God’s aesthetic judgment but rather his declaration that the purpose of each

aspect of creation, as willed by God, is good. Each element is equally valued; all are equally good, because each exists for, and only for, the purpose that God wills. All creation, in unity, has even greater value than any single part. In the terse and un-superlative Hebrew, God deems creation, as a whole, to be “very good.” A better way to translate this is to say, “God said, ‘Behold, it is completely perfect.’” God created the universe without fault, all its parts existing in perfect harmony.

Humanity is the high point of creation, only in the sense of being created *imago dei*, or in the image of God. We are not created in the image of God in any anthropological sense, or even in a spiritual sense, but in the ability to be in relationship and communion with God, having insight of God’s will and therefore creation’s purpose. It is in this capacity of understanding God’s intent that we are given “dominion,” or “stewardship” of the earth, of all of its matter, of all of its creatures. Dominion is a matter of agency. Humanity’s purpose, in creation, is to be agents of God, to be God’s representative, commissioned to maintain and enforce God’s own claim to lordship over the earth. We are to maintain the perfection, meaning the “balance” of creation. Any other action or use of the created order, mineral, plant or animal that interrupts the balance or perfection is misuse and is sin.

The Yahwist / Elohist Account of Creation

The second and far-older account of creation begins with Genesis 2:5. It is actually two accounts blended into one, by an editor, sometime after the return from exile (Babylonian captivity of 586 BCE to 538 BCE), but the editor’s sources, in written form, date from at least 1000 BCE and are probably older. The oral forms of these creation myths come from Mesopotamia and are very ancient. The two written sources used by the final Genesis editor, sources known as “J,” or Yahwist, and “E,” or Elohist, derive from oral myths and are the work of Hebrews. In their earliest Jewish forms, the Yahwist myth developed within cultic ritual activity in the south of the holy land; the Elohist form developed, likewise, in the north. Sometime, shortly before the exile, these two strands were combined into a single written source by a redactor, and it is this that appears in Genesis as we know it. The J/E source is markedly different, in form and theology, from the later, priestly source.

In the Yahwist/Elohist source, God does not create *ex nihilo*. There is no concept of a cosmos or even a heaven; there is only the earth. Its original state is a waterless waste, without vegetation – desert wasteland. In this wasteland, God created a garden, Eden. The garden had a water source of incalculable capacity, enough water for all the needs of the garden with runoff capacity equal to the needs of the remainder of the earth. Significantly, in this account there is no notice of time.

This older creation account has a markedly different creation order than the priestly account. In the Yahwist/Elohist myth, the human male is made first, out of dust. He is given life by the breath of God. Woman is not made at this point. The second thing God did was to make a garden, which is better understood as a “park.” In this park, or garden, God put all sorts of trees, including the “tree of life” and the “tree of the knowledge of

good and evil.” The concept of the “tree of life” is not developed. There is only a mention of it at the end of the myth story. God says to the heavenly hosts, with whom he is in conversation, that because the man and women have eaten of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they have “become like us.” It is necessary to drive the humans out of the garden lest they eat from the fruit of the tree of life and also become immortal. Implied is “immortal like God and his heavenly hosts.” Eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil instills omniscience, including moral knowledge, giving humanity knowledge like God. It is this quest to be God-like that is sinful. In this sense, the fall from grace is an upward fall, and the acquisition of knowledge conveys moral responsibility.

This discussion of the ramifications of eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is in-sequential; the action and consequences fall later in the story. It is mentioned here because this is where the creation of these trees falls in the story. After creating the trees, God created all the species of animals, with the exception of fish, which are not mentioned. Finally, at the end of the creation sequence, God created woman out of man.

Genesis 2: 15 tells us that when God put man into the Garden (before woman was created) he gave specific instructions as to his expectations of mankind. This is often translated as “till it and care for it.” This is not incorrect, but the meaning is lost in the English translation. The operative Hebrew words are *abad* and *shamar*. A far better translation, in conveying the Hebrew meaning, is “to serve and keep it,” serving it in the sense of obligatory stewardship and keeping it in the sense of maintaining its balance and unity. Man inhabits but does not own the garden. God owns the garden. Man’s role is a servant or agent role, as God’s representative. The myth about eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil seeks to explain the loss of environmental perfection. Having attempted to supplant God by acquiring God’s knowledge and, thereby his authority, the result of man’s action is catastrophic; paradise is lost. “Cursed is the ground because of you,” God said. Through disobedience, harmony is lost. Instead of fruit, the Bible says, the earth now brings forth thorns and thistles.

Theological and Moral Conclusions from the Genesis Myths

God created from nothing and creation is continuing. The continuing creation is teleological; that is, it is moving forward, or unfolding, in accordance with God’s will and his purpose, a movement or evolution that is programmed into creation as an essential part of creation itself. This teleological “diagram” is expressed and conveyed in God’s creative Word. This is a theological notion; it is not science, but the notion is entirely in keeping with the scientific theories of big bang and evolution. There are no contradictions. Here, science and theology complement each other. This understanding of creation is certainly not a new concept. As early as the fourth century CE, Basil of Caesarea and Augustine of Hippo said that the six days of creation should not be understood as chronological; rather, they should be understood as a literary framework that the inspired writers used to organize and present the various elements of creation.

God created the universe in a state of perfect balance and harmony, each part related to and dependent upon the other. No one part could truly exist without the other. Creation is a perfect expression of god's will. Again, this is not a new notion, either. Hildegard of Bingen, a 12th century German theologian, wrote, "God has made all things in the world in consideration of everything else."

The universe is God's dominion. He sustains it and without God, the universe would cease to exist. Creation exists only in and only through God. God delegates maintenance responsibility to humanity, created to function in an agency role. Because humanity does not rise to its agency responsibilities, the earth is in travail. Christians have a moral responsibility to be good stewards for the earth, which includes the responsibility to make themselves aware of ecological issues and actively engage in preservation efforts. The argument, often expressed by conservative Christians, that in giving humanity dominion over the earth God has given humanity unrestricted power to use its resources with abandon is utterly without theological basis.

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