



Caring for creation

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Back in 1967, Lynn White, who was a professor of history at UCLA, wrote a now-classic article on ecological crisis. "Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt," he wrote, because Christian beliefs about human nature and destiny have fostered the growth of a kind of science and technology that is ecologically unfriendly.

I thought of White's words as I prepared to listen to Dr. David Suzuki at a Christian health care conference the other day. Suzuki, trained as a genetic scientist, has gained international fame as an ecological activist. I expected him to say that religion was a big part of the problem, and that if the world was to be saved, we would need better science, better economics, more government regulation. To my surprise he emphasized the necessity of spirituality. He said that he had learned from aboriginal peoples around the world that "we must treat the elements of the earth as sacred."

So far as I know David Suzuki has not become a Christian. But he's clearly not an old-fashioned atheist either. And I am wondering whether he and the many other environmentalists who share his feelings are now open to hearing what the Bible and Christian tradition say about the world and the relationship of people to the rest of that world. Could they find Christianity an ally rather than an enemy?

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For a start, here are four tenets of the faith that I would offer for their consideration.

1. **God creates.** While human enterprise might in some sense be creative, Genesis 1 shows God at work establishing order out of chaos before humans make an appearance. And when God first creates the beasts of sea, air and land, he sees a goodness that is entirely independent of human interests. So to a Christian mind it makes sense to talk about what's good or bad for animals in themselves, not just how animals are instrumentally useful for human interests. Being cruel to animals so that people can get their kicks is one of the evils that got Catherine Booth incensed.

2. **Human beings are earth-creatures.** Lynn White pointed to those elements in Christian teaching that say human beings are above nature, that emphasize some kind of godlikeness in humans. But surely a faithful reading of the Bible would have us see how much we are like, not different from, the rest of the living creatures. According to my friend, Professor Waldemar Janzen, a noted Old Testament scholar, "adam" could be translated "earthling" since it is closely related to "adamah," which is the Hebrew word for earth/soil. The basic meaning of "nepesh" (which many English versions of Genesis 2:7 render as "living soul") is "throat, neck," meaning to draw attention to the human need for breath and food. Janzen writes, "The Bible teaches us to understand human beings by their lowliness, their need, and their weakness."

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3. **The human vocation is to image God.** Sometimes Christians have read Genesis 1:26-28 as a mandate to dominate the world and exploit it exclusively for human purposes. But actually, to bear God's image means something quite different, I think. In the ancient world, the one who "bore the image" of the king was a servant entrusted with a symbol of the king's authority. There was no intrinsic dignity in the servant, but bearing the image signified that he was to act as vice-regent. And this was to be done in ways faithful to the person and purposes of the king. From which I infer that Christians are to image the God who knows about and cares for the lilies and the sparrows (e.g. Matthew 6), the God whose face we see in Jesus. Exercising dominion (Genesis 1:27) does not mean domination.

4. **Limited knowledge and limited authority go together.** The original divine intention was for humans to tend the earth garden—to exercise delegated authority in something for which they were fitted. Sin entered human existence when people aspired to unlimited control. Wanting to make all the rules, acknowledging no limits, moral, physical, intellectual, or economic, is arguably still at the root of human wrong-doing. God said to Job when he had the gall to call God to account, "Does the hawk take flight by your wisdom?" Biblical Christians understand that people simply don't and can't know enough to be trusted with the fate of the earth.

If I'm right, the influences that led to the crises Lynn White wrote about were distortions of Christian beliefs, not the whole picture.

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Even so, there's a long journey from theological generalities to workable environmental policies and practices. We need to have the eyes to spot the Francis of Assisi and Catherine Booths—the practically-minded Christian earth-keepers—in our midst. And courage to follow them.

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