

Kyoto and Job

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Prime Minister Jean Chrétien brought 2002 to a close by ensuring that Canada ratified the Kyoto Protocol on climate change.

As we have come to expect in Canadian politics, leading up to the ratification there was wrangling between the feds and the provinces. In this case it was about constitutional powers, the federal government being responsible for international agreements and the provinces having jurisdiction over natural resources. As we also have come to expect, there was a Canada-USA-UN angle: one side alleged that Canada's eagerness to sign on was because it likes being the UN's "best nation;" another side alleged that Canadian opposition to Kyoto was paid for by large US-owned oil companies.

It's not that this political maneuvering is uninteresting or unimportant, but it makes you wonder whether we have lost sight of the state of the environment, which is what Kyoto is *supposed* to be all about.

According to Natural Resources Canada, "the Kyoto Protocol is an international agreement to take action on climate change negotiated by more than 160 countries in December 1997....Canada was an active participant in the negotiations and, as a signatory to the Protocol, has made a commitment to reduce its GHG [greenhouse gases] emissions to 6 percent below 1990 levels in the period between 2008 and 2012...."

"There are six greenhouse gases covered under the 1997 Kyoto Protocol...:

- **Carbon dioxide (CO₂)** is the most significant greenhouse gas released by human activities, mostly through the burning of fossil fuels. It is the main [human] contributor to climate change.

- **Methane (CH₄)** is produced when vegetation is burned, digested or rotted with no oxygen present. Garbage dumps, rice paddies, and grazing cows and other livestock release lots of methane.
- **Nitrous oxide (N₂O)** occurs naturally in the environment but human activities are increasing the amounts. Nitrous oxide is released when chemical fertilizers and manure are used in agriculture.
- **Hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs)**
- **Perfluorocarbons (PFCs)**
- **Sulphur hexafluoride (SF₆)”**

The evident assumption behind Kyoto is that climate change (at least this climate change caused by human activity) is a bad thing, and that human activity to arrest climate change is a good thing. My question is whether Christian beliefs have anything to say about *that* assumption.

To begin to answer it takes us into views about the general relationship between humanity and the rest of creation.

According to one view, humans have been given sovereign dominion over creation. Genesis 1:28 says, “Fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” In his famous article “The historical roots of our ecological crisis,” Professor Lynn White argued that Christianity transformed the West by banishing the pantheism that suffused other cultures’ attitudes towards plants, animals and weather, and enabling the emergence of modern science. But, he wrote, it also inculcated the view that what was not human in creation was suitable material for human exploitation. And in that way, White argued, Genesis 1:28 has been bad for the environment.

That’s because to “dominion” entails a freedom from moral constraints. Sovereigns are sovereign precisely because they have the right to do as they please. If I own a nice bed that I then ruin by using the mattress as a trampoline, I end up with an uncomfortable bed to lie in, which may be dumb it’s not morally wrong. Likewise, if the environment is

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“mere stuff,” changing it can be foolish and short-sighted, but it’s hard to see how it’s wrong.

It’s customary nowadays for biblical scholars to say that Lynn White (or the historical figures like Bacon and Galileo and Newton at whose intellectual doorstep White laid the blame) got it wrong—that Genesis doesn’t teach such a view at all. (I’m not fully convinced by these scholars, by the way. It seems to me that the Hebrew *rādâ*, “dominion,” does bear the connotations of not being duty-bound to that over which one has dominion.)

The position one is more likely to find embraced by biblical scholars is that humans are *stewards* of the non-human creation. Stewards do not own what they steward, but rather are entrusted to take care of it on behalf of the real owner. Stewards may have wide discretion, but they are always morally accountable for what they do with and to their trust.

William van Geest gives us an admirably accessible expression of this view in *God’s Earthkeepers* (published—on recycled paper—by EFC in 1995). “Whether we choose to accept the responsibility or not, God has created us as stewards of his creation....We reflect God’s presence on the earth. Individually and collectively, we are accountable to God for what we do with and on this earth. No other creature has this capacity to destroy creation or to enhance it. But our unique place in creation is not a license to do whatever we please.... God’s intent for our use of the creation was and is to preserve its capacities, natural cycles and rhythms, and to benefit all people and other creatures....[Our current] situation presents us with an unparalleled opportunity to fulfill our biblical calling as stewards. Knowing our limits and using technology wisely, we can find the biblical balance between being mastered by and being masters over creation. We can become ‘earthkeepers’ as God truly intended, caring for his creation rather than conquering—and destroying—it.”

This has basically been my view until recently, but now I’m having doubts. Some of the doubts arise because of what I detect as an unconscious hubris in the very best stewards. “We’ve acted irresponsibly in the past,” they say. “We’ve acted as if we owned the earth, when in reality God owns it and we’ve only been entrusted with it, to care for it, nurture it, develop it. And where we’ve messed up in the past we ought to make amends

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and heal the parts of nature that we've damaged." My problem is that human beings may not be smart enough to care for all of nature, and we may not even be smart enough to know how to fix what we've broken. To think we now know how to "use technology wisely," as van Geest put it, betrays a tinge of pride, I think. A significant part of my life is spent in the world of nurses, doctors and hospitals, and one of the big problems in that world is iatrogenic suffering. Suffering, that is, that is caused by well-meaning care providers who cannot guarantee that their good intentions don't go awry.

Now, I don't mean to imply that it's a bad thing for Canada to reduce its CO2 output, but it would be prideful to think that doing so will ensure that the climate will get better. (In fact, I doubt that we even know what an ideal earth climate would be.) Those of us who think we are up to a God-given responsibility to care for the whole of creation need to re-read Romans 8. There the Apostle describes the world's pain: "the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains."

This brings me to a third view found in Scripture about the relationship of people to the non-human creation. It's the view that human beings are to learn to simply appreciate those parts of creation, and appreciate them as things that come as truly from God's hand as human beings do. It's a view captured better in Job 38-41 than anywhere else I know.

"Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?...Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?...Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars, and spreads its wings toward the south? Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up and makes its nest on high?...Look at Behemoth, which I made just as I made you....It is the first of the great acts of God—only its Maker can approach it with the sword.'"

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There was a time when I truly believed that the Christian calling was to tame the wilderness and turn the whole world into a carefully tended garden. But when I read these words from Job I am overwhelmed by the majesty and complexity of the creation as it has come from God, unengineered and unstewarded by human wit. To turn it all into a garden, even a very nice garden with gardeners who only want what is best for what's growing there, strikes me as offensive. I want to join Job and say "we have uttered what we did not understand, things too wonderful for us, which we did not know."

Does any of this help us with Kyoto? I suppose the gulf between general theological views and specific political agendas is always pretty wide. But, seeing (as we all must now see) that the world's ecosystems are so interconnected that it's inevitable that human beings will continue to have large effects on the environment, I judge that it's more Christian for us to do so as stewards than as sovereigns; and more Christian yet to treat our stewardship as fallible and limited.

I live in Winnipeg. You'll understand therefore that there are times when climate change holds a certain attraction! And who knows, it may happen yet that the climate of the Prairies becomes more like the climate of the West Los Angeles where I used to live. But it's hard for me to think that engineering such a change would be good. Better I should learn to admire how -40 here contributes to the delicate balance of weather around God's big blue marble.

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