Distinctive Responsibilities for the Environment

A Christian Perspective by

Susan Power Bratton, Ph.D.

JUST FOUNDATIONS
FIFTY YEARS AFTER THE LIBERATION OF AUSCHWITZ

Just prior to beginning this essay, I visited the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. The exhibits display artifacts of the technology utilized to annihilate entire human families and communities. I walked through a railroad box car, once crammed with the aged, new mothers, infants, and children, as well the able-bodied men on their way to starvation, physical abuse, and ultimately, death in the concentration camps. I paused between piles of shoes, left by victims barely able to walk, much less to fight back against their oppressors, as they were herded into gas chambers disguised as showers. I stood beside wooden bunks, once occupied by two or more actors, rabbis, students, watchmakers, porters, pastors, lawyers, tailors, or grocers, thrown together in a hellish society where all past, present, and future individuality were lost. I observed models of huge ovens—the blasphemous engines of human sacrifice, whose smoke stained the skies of Europe, and asked with every stinking, grey blast, if all concepts of righteousness, and loving kindness were mockeries and illusions.

Fifty years ago, a kingdom of death reigned in the venerable centers of western thought and western culture. Bombs and rockets tore through London, while Berlin, once a center of literature, painting, and music, disintegrated into a pile of disorganized rubble. Piles of emaciated bodies lay carelessly stacked in the camps of Bergen-Belsen and Auschwitz-Birkenau. Ironically, this masterwork of destruction was orchestrated by governmental and cultural leaders who claimed their political movement was rooted in the soil and that their major desire was for the life and health of their people and their land. The Nazis encouraged their youth to go hiking and mountain climbing. Their labor crops sent young men and women out to plant trees and restore eroded farm lands. If the Nazis were so environmentally oriented, what made them so disparaging of the value of life? If they really cared for the farmer, how did they rationalize converting his pasture into a mine field or a cemetery? If they really appreciated the forests, why did they tear them apart with artillery and tanks, in search of partisans, the allied armies, or

even unarmed Slavs and Jews? If they really loved the marshes and seaside, why did they turn them into the bloody beaches of Dunkirk and Omaha?

Investigating the Nazi ideology of nature and the environment can still enlighten us fifty years after the liberation of the concentration camps and the Allied victory in Europe. Although superficially nature friendly, the Nazi understanding of creation and even of the meaning of life was in deep conflict with Christian values and with the Christian Scriptures. One way to understand what is distinct and valuable about Christianity is to compare it to something in stark contradiction to it. I will begin this essay with a brief review of the core "theology" of "ecofacism" and contrast it to Christian thought about the Creator and the creation.

THE IDEOLOGY OF DEATH AND THE BOOK OF LIFE...

Prior to the Nazi rise to power, Germany was in social, economic, and political turmoil. At a deeper level, however, Germany was a nation in spiritual crisis. Embarrassed by defeat and an unpopular peace treaty at the end of World War I, strapped by inflation, and threatened by political changes, including the rise of communism, the Germans seemed beset by evil forces they could not control. Although there were still many Christians in Germany, rationalism and "demythologizing" had long dominated German intellectual culture. A nation, recovering from a brutal war, needed to believe there was someone or something beneficent watching over them and that the turmoil had some positive value. When Christendom and philosophy provided neither a bright future nor an explanation for societal failures, the Nazis marched into the mythological gap and offered a human demi-god, Adolf Hitler, and a broken cross to replace the missing hopeful concepts and symbols.

As an exercise in determining what the Nazis really thought about the environment, we can view their propaganda films aimed at attracting the German public to their cause. These productions, very aesthetically directed and edited, explain the "creation theology" of the National Socialists. *Triumph of the Will*, a documentary about the Nazi party rallies in Nuremberg, begins with Hitler flying through the clouds and eventually emerging from the darkened door of the airplane as if he were a sky-god appearing *ex nihilo* (from nothing). He frequently stands above the crowd with his hand raised as if to bless them. Early in the film, uniformed Nazis light fires in imitation of ancient pagan rituals. Their swastika decorated banners emerge in great streams as young men parade through the streets. Hitler and his henchmen stand on platforms **in front of** the churches of Nuremberg, and their flags flutter over the steeples.

We thus encounter the first and the most important difficulty in Nazi ideology—they have replaced the creator God and the divine goodness of the creation with a political movement centered on human history and human ascendancy. The Nazis drew on Germany's pagan past to provide a new cosmology, but their post-19th century ideology of nature was not a rerun of Iron Age tribal polytheism, it was really an extremely anthropocentric (human centered) or even androcentric (man/male centered) philosophy. Hitler takes the place of the old high deity, Odin, and his advisors become an all-male pantheon of demi-gods. This implies that human relationship with nature should be directed towards the needs of the state, and more specifically, towards the desires of the dominant political party.

In contrast to the Nazis, if one reads the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2, we find that the creation came into existence prior to human beings, and is pleasing to God in its own right. Further, when God declared the creation to be good (the original Hebrew text implying both good and beautiful), God gave all the creation inherent value or a worth independent of its provision of human needs. This implies that when we interact with the non-human realm of creation, we should consider God's enjoyment of and will for the rest of the cosmos as well as our own immediate human desires.

Many philosophers tout the concept of a biocentric environmental ethic which they propose will counteract our destructive anthropocentric western mindset. Humans, however, have difficulty being objective about what is best for nature and best for themselves. Biblical scholars will claim that the Genesis account of creation is very theocentric (God centered). As Christians, we should try to find a means of interacting with the creation which incorporates all three components of the creation story. Perhaps one way to conceptualize this is that Christians should be God-directed and bio-considerate—while remaining human-concerned. The three values should in turn combine to give us a creation-caring ethic.

A second difficulty with Nazi ideology is that it usurps the power of nature and brings it into the human sphere. In the Nazi-sponsored film, *Olympia*, covering the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, director Leni Reifenstahl opens the second segment, "The Festival of Beauty," with shots of trees, birds, squirrels, and other natural features. The viewer then sees men running through the forest. The camera follows the nude athletes through a pond where they emerge bare-buttocked, and head for a sauna. Then, close up shots catch these well-muscled young men, dripping with moisture as if in a giant womb. *Olympia* portrays this primordial creation event as if the power and beauty of the entire cosmos were drained into the bodies of these lithe, blond males. All nature is directed towards a very limited human project.

The Bible, in opposition to these images, presents the intention of God for the cosmos as partially inscrutable. Further, God has chosen habitats and lives for many of the earth's animals and plants that are free from human control. According to the Book of Job, the Creator placed the wild ass in the desert and the hippopotamus in the river swamps and not in human constructed stables, because God intended them to be wild. Humans do not understand everything about the workings of nature, nor do they completely grasp the origins of the universe. We are not the sole concern of God, nor was the cosmos created for us alone.

Olympia might also be interpreted as presenting the Germans, or northern Europeans, as the pinnacle of evolution—a theme which diminishes the importance of the variety of the natural world and the diversity of humanity as a whole. Nazi ideology does not comprehend the wonder of nature and its origins independent of short-lived human dictatorships and political movements. The Bible in contrast emphasizes the amazing acts of God. Genesis 1 describes not just the birds of the air and the beasts of the field, but the creatures of the oceans. Genesis 1:21 proclaims, "So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good." (RSV) One of the original characteristics of the creation was its great diversity. Other Biblical texts, such as those in Psalm 104, describe the beauty of divine order in the complexity of the natural world.

The Bible also makes it clear that the fertility and productivity of the earth originate with the divine, not with human will. Genesis 1:22 tells us that God blessed the sea creatures and the denizens of the heavens saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." Nazi propaganda films, in contrast, show Hitler blessing the crowds or groups of black uniformed SS men standing behind groups of peasants displaying the harvest from the fields and orchards. The message of both images was that the Nazi state guaranteed the productivity and the health of the land. God was repeatedly left out of the picture.

The Nazi passion for dividing the world into dichotomous categories—belonging and not belonging, or ours and theirs—rejected part of humanity as "unnatural." Biblical texts, such as the Book of Jonah and the Gospels, in contrast, repeatedly tell of God's deep and abiding concern for the diversity of humankind. In the case of Ninevah, God pitied not just the hundred and twenty thousand residents who were not Hebrews but also their numerous livestock. Nazi ideology usurped the prerogatives of the Creator by declaring who does and who does not belong on the planet earth. Much of what was deadly about Nazi thought lies in their presumption in deeming others unworthy to

share the creation. In their search for "Lebensraum" (space to live), they annihilated entire Jewish towns and gypsy encampments as well as removing and killing hundreds of thousands of Slavs and other "non-Aryans" who stood in their way. Beset with an excessive will to order and control, the Nazis tried to remake the world in their image. The result was not just unenvironmental, it was gravely inhuman as well.

THE ROOTS OF DESTRUCTION

The Nazi project demonstrates how easily western industro-technical culture can take a destructive path and bring misery instead of blessing. One of the things that made the Holocaust possible was the development of modern transportation and communication networks. Without the help of an early proto-type of the computer, the Nazis would not have been able to keep track of the Germans themselves, much less their myriads of prisoners. Potentially beneficial concepts such as environmental care were diverted to disguise evil intentions. Helpful technologies, such as railroads, became trails of death in unregenerate hands. In coveting human power, the Nazis took divine gifts and turned them to evil ends.

For the Nazi, the most important creation event is the arrival of a new political movement and, supposedly, a thousand year reign. In *Triumph of the Will*, Hitler reaches out his hand, much like God does on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, and instills "life" into marching columns of soldiers as they goose step past him. Women were largely absent from this and other Nazi acts of "creation." In fact, Nazi ideology reduces the feminine and reproductive to a merely functional role in society. The Nazi "acts of creation" glorify the cult of death and with it the human power to destroy. When black-uniformed SS men click by the reviewing stand or stand at the railroad stations at the concentration camps, they present a nihilistic mirror image to the Biblical concept of creation. Instead of diversity and fertility, we see an oncoming flood of destructive single-mindedness and invasive militarism. Instead of love for the creation, we see a lust to control it, confine it, and make it productive for limited human ends. Instead of a care for all God's people, we see an irrational hatred for those who are not like "the movement" and an indifference to the rights of others to enjoy the beauties of God's world. The Nazis seemed always to miss the concept that the creation is something to be shared—both with our human neighbors and with the other creatures God has brought into being. We should ask ourselves, as we memorialize both the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the concentration camps and victory in Europe this spring of 1995, could technologically sophisticated culture unleash such destructive forces again?

In summary, the failure of Nazi "environmentalism" to actually protect the natural world is rooted in a nation-centered and androcentric anthropology (concept of humanity) and cosmology (concept of the origin and meaning of the universe). Compartmentalization of ethical standards resulted in conflicting values or goals that encouraged destructive policies. The Nazis, for example, touted land care and land conquest simultaneously. The Nazis had a very limited notion of why creation exists, or who may share it. In attempting to capture all Europe and north Africa for themselves, they tore the very fabric of the divine creation and turned to ashes all that is loved by God .

THINKING ABOUT HISTORIC CHRISTIAN ROLES IN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

In the pseudo-environmentalism of the Nazi era, we can see how easily evil can be identified as good, and how completely entire societies can disguise or ignore irresponsible behaviors. Therefore, one of the first and most important contributions Christianity can make to our current environmental dilemmas is to encourage and enhance the process of cultural reflection. Christians themselves have been dangerously lax in this important spiritual pursuit. It is all too easy to spout a few Bible verses, suggest that faith and hope will carry us through, and leave it at that. In a troubled world steaming towards the end of a violent century, the righteous path is neither self-evident, nor is it easy to tread. Many environmental issues are life and death matters—for people attempting to make a living in degraded landscapes or those who are exposed to the toxic fruits of industrial civilization, and for our fellow creatures whose habitats are disappearing, or whose reproductive capacity is being quickly consumed by human overharvest. When dealing with environmental reality, it remains all too easy to say one thing and do another.

CHRISTIAN REFLECTION AND ENVIRONMENTAL REALITY

During the 1960s, Francis Schaeffer, Os Guinness, and other Christian thinkers concerned about the younger generation began a program of addressing important interfaces between our contemporary culture and the Christian faith. Schaeffer, in fact, penned the small but important volume, *Pollution and the Death of Man,* in order to provide a Christian perspective on the growing public awareness of the environment brought on by Rachel Carson's best seller, *Silent Spring.* Schaeffer thought of the

Christians as having something important to add that modern culture so often lacks. In the case of the environment, we are in need of yet more depth of understanding and more reflective effort. Rather than abating, our environmental problems have worsened since Schaeffer attributed the growing environmental destruction to human sin.

OUR CHRISTIAN HERITAGE, AN ENVIRONMENTAL HERITAGE?

Although there are many issues to contemplate, I would like to suggest, as a first exercise for reflection, the potential Christian roots of American environmentalism. We too often think of environmental reform as something to do with progressive or liberal politics or as tied to the New Age or to a revival of pagan cults. In his 1993 book, *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and Ecological Imagination*,* historian Donald Worster not only presents a brief defense of the early Puritan legislation protecting forests and game, he suggests that "the dissident tradition in American and northern European Protestantism" is one of the original sources of American environmental concern. Worster identifies four values of American Protestants that underlie environmental movements going back into the 19th century; moral activism, ascetic discipline, egalitarian individualism, and aesthetic spirituality.

We need to reflect first, on the truth of this assertion; second, on the reasons these values appeared in Christian history; third, on the degree to which they are still important today; and, fourth, on their current adequacy. Should we abandon these values, replace them, enhance them, or revive them while bringing other relevant Christian concepts to the environmental scene?

Moral activism. Worster (pp. 196-197), in discussing the origins of these "formative Protestant qualities," attributes the rise of moral activism to figures such as John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Knox whom he describes as "energetic radicals hacking away at obstacles to social change." Worster considers Protestantism to be "a religion for activists," and finds that although 18th and 19th century Christians from diverse denominations had "no common goal in all that busyness, ... there was a shared moralizing energy." Contemporary environmentalists arise from this heritage as folks set on converting the remainder of the earth to their ideals.

Worster's suggestion that Christian social concern is a foundational stream in environmental activism carries as a corollary the sad fact that American social ethics may have largely left Christianity behind. As the Nazi era proved, it is all too easy for Christians to be silent, just when their voice is most needed—even in the very birthplace of the Reformation! Today's evangelicals often "look back" fondly to the early days of

the United States as a pastoral period when people were more moral, the nation was more Christian, the water and air were cleaner, children still grew up on farms or in small towns, and the atmosphere of the country was infused with divine light. Religious historians now believe that many, if not a majority, of the first European settlers were quite secularized, that Christianity was probably more widespread after the Revolution than before, and the idea that Christians founded the nation and are now in decline is a cultural myth.

If Christian values influenced the first American environmentalists, it was probably less due to a Christian majority and more due to the quality and depth of the Christian theological imagination and their dedicated engagement with the problems faced by their communities. Henry David Thoreau was hardly a mainstream figure in the Protestantism of his day. Yet he was influenced by Christian abolitionism and owes much intellectually to his Calvinist forebears. Perhaps in the evangelical reaction to denominational fragmentation, liberal theology, and modernity, we have lost some of our willingness to be "activists." Specifically because we are afraid it forces us to be a minority voice in a secularized culture. Ironically, colonial Christians, such as Jonathan Edwards were probably in the same position—they did not represent the majority, but were trying to speak to society as a whole.

Christians today need to discuss how much of a priority to give to environmental ethics, which issues are of the greatest concern, and **who** in the Christian community is best qualified to engage the present tangle of issues. We must ask ourselves if the people around us are any less needy than those encountered by the Reformers or the first Baptists and Methodists? Can we justify the contemporary disinterest in Christian activism which extends far beyond the environmental realm?

Ascetic discipline. Interestingly, Worster finds the second critical legacy of Protestantism is ascetic discipline which one can trace from the writings of Jonathan Edwards through the 19th century reformers and naturalists. He reasons that it began as "a reaction against an European culture that seemed to be given over,...to sensuous, gratification seeking behavior." American Christianity began in concert with capitalism, but in recent times, the consumption oriented culture appears to have replaced old Protestant self-denial and hard work. Worster suggests environmentalism's warnings that "a return to a disciplined, self-denying life may be the only way out for a world heading for catastrophe" are a continuation of the Puritan message.

Are we reflecting adequately on the impacts of our materialism, both on the environment and on our spirituality? If film makers once deified Hitler by following him

through the clouds, our television commercials now do the same thing for automobiles, perfume, and alcoholic beverages. One can focus on a flashy white car capturing the heavens for 45 seconds after Rosanne Barr redefines the meaning of "earthy." During a recent Super Bowl game, "da good old boys" and a huge bottle of beer appeared as Greek gods. It is little wonder we are having trouble caring for creation when our evening entertainment uses cross-cultural religious symbolism to sell luxuries and to encourage us to think that "ascent" is defined in terms of material success. Is deifying a sparkling pasteurized drink any less dangerous than deifying a pedestrian looking Austrian with a mustache? What does Christian asceticism mean today, if anything? Will it require yet another radical religious upheaval to address the "sensuous...gratification seeking behavior" of not just our nation, but of many others, as well?

The problem of compartmentalization of ethical values or standards is also important here. We may be keeping the Protestant work ethic to produce self-gratification or social status while abandoning its importance in maintaining our communities and caring for others. Further, we have largely removed the maintenance of spiritual self-discipline from our economic lives. Does Christian asceticism have any meaning in such a materially wealthy culture? And if so, how should it be applied?

Egalitarian individualism. Worster's third Protestant reformation root, egalitarian individualism, has become, ethically, an increasingly sticky matter. On the one hand, it is a critical underpinning, not only of evangelical theology of salvation but of the business and political culture of the United States. Worster suggests, "It originates in the conviction that God's promise is to the individual, freed from the bonds of tradition and hierarchy; and in that promise every person, regardless of learning or social rank stands equal to every other....More over, the very core of our political life has been committed to this social philosophy: the sovereignty of the individual, the natural right of self determination." The problem is, however, that although this concern for each human has served to protect the poor and the marginalized and even to offer rights and political status to natural objects, radical individualism untempered by community commitment,. It may also be a serious environmental hazard. I may believe, for example, that if I own property, I can dump toxic wastes on it even if the poisons leach into the ground water and taint the neighbors' wells. I may believe, I have a right to a piece of the economic action, no matter what the cost to my relationship to God or to other people. As Donald Worster suggests, once the teaching of assertive individualism has been set in motion, it "can prove exceedingly difficult to control."

Although we associate a strongly individualist approach to life with such major environmental thinkers as Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, the question for Christians remains, "When do we protect individual rights and when do we respond as a community?" One of the problems with Nazi ideology is that the creation of a political movement becomes the keystone of the culture. You are either for or against the party—the will of the individual and even moderate stances or questioning positions become a danger to the execution of the thousand year Reich. In our contemporary milieu, we seem inclined to err in the opposite direction. We will not interfere with someone else's business, or personal life. We not only do not require some degree of community participation, we do not even expect it.

The issue of individuality is difficult environmentally because it hits the gnawing question, "who is responsible for global and regional environmental degradation?" Can we respond only on an individual basis? And, how do Christians fit it? For some Christians, the environment is a distraction and not a call for Christian ministry. We are the most populous of all the world's religions. Christians are found in significant numbers on every continent. Are we, in our individuality, honoring the rights of others—or are we isolating ourselves, and ignoring an important call to international environmental dialog?

We need to consider the impacts of the so-called "Protestant ethic." It may be that the work ethic has become an end in itself, rather than a means of serving God or participating more fully in human community. A majority of our environmental difficulties originate in the economic sphere. To what extent must we regulate the vocational or even the vocational activities of others for the common good? What does the Biblical concept 'that the earth is the Lord's' have to do with maintaining individual property rights? What responsibilities do we have for our own actions? One might conclude that we have taken our "Protestantism" too far in the secular and economic spheres, and not far enough in terms of spirituality and ministry.

Aesthetic spirituality. Worster's last major tie between Protestantism and environmentalism—and he claims it is "probably the most important of all"—is aesthetic spirituality. Again, this goes back to Jonathan Edwards, who in turning to nature, "discovered one could find the glory of the Creator and by contemplating that beauty one could be delivered from evil." For Edwards, and many who came after him, nature was characterized by "order and harmony and virtue" while "unregenerate, unredeemed humans" were the true source of pollution and destruction. The reason the natural aesthetic is such an important source of environmental "righteousness" is that it gives people a relationship to nature and invests nature with "intrinsic value and meaning."

This in turn makes it much more difficult to abuse and exploit, and awards not just political worth to environmental protection, it gives such actions religious worth as well.

For the Nazi movement, the aesthetics of nature took two problematic directions. One was the drawing of all natural beauty, not into the wonders of God but into the form of the Aryan male. Much of the world was thereby excluded. The second direction was a lust to conquer. This was expressed in the post-World War I mountain climbing tradition where the ultimate goal was not contemplating the divine reflected in alpine landscapes but in seeking repeated brushes with death. As Worster points out, the thought of Jonathan Edwards reaches beyond utilitarian and instrumental values for nature—the world is not defined by human need alone. Nazi thought values the land primarily as "Lebensraum" to support the ever growing nation of Superior Men (Übermenchen). Today we believe that the world belongs to the Business Men and the Communications Overlords, and instead of Lebensraum, we seek Growth and Profit.

For us the question is perhaps whether we can still identify the beauty in nature as divine handiwork. On one hand, science sometimes tricks us into thinking of everything functionally. Nature is very efficient, and all those bright-colored tropical birds are the product of millennia of evolution (a little like a successful line of automobile models that have sold well).

On the other hand, we may relate to nature as a product or a utility. In our television commercials, beer appears out of a waterfall or an iceberg while deodorant springs out of a free running river. The screen invites us to the Rockies so we can bounce down the mountains repeatedly on our skis (while taking the lift up) and finish the day with mixed beverages and hot appetizers in a cushy lounge. Nature becomes adventure to break our boredom or a route to higher social status on the slopes or at the beach (a view from the top condo, closest to the waves).

How many people do you know who really see God's beauty in the natural world? How many do you know who would even think to look? Jonathan Edwards would have preached through a hundred Sundays to try to get us to grasp the glories of the divine beyond the camera lens, the glossy prints and the cellophane wrappers.

Environmental pluralism. Worster points out at the end of his discussion of the Christian heritage of U.S. environmentalism that the old American Christian way of looking at society will not be adequate for the future. In the 18th and 19th century, American reform movements had largely Protestant roots—a heritage we are still experiencing "in diverse and contradictory ways." Today, the nation's "moral discourse" has become more varied, and certain common trends, including the "the enraptured

individualist going out into the wilderness," are less subject to social consensus than they were a hundred years ago. In fact, the reform movement once directed towards preserving our own natural landscape has gone global. Americans with a Protestant heritage must now open dialog with others who find Christianity in any form an "alien tradition."

The move to a cross-cultural framework is healthy if we understand that it requires both extra work and a credible witness. Our ecotheology must be well thought out and able to withstand the scrutiny of those who may be unsympathetic both to Christianity and to environmental discourse. Further, we must articulate our ethical positions in ways that can be easily understood by others— both the secularized majority in our own society, and the great mix of political, religious, and technical leaders internationally. It would be an ironic failure if a religion that claims to "speak" to all peoples were incomprehensible when addressing one of the major worldwide concerns of the coming century.

PHILOSOPHY OR THEOLOGY?

THE FAILINGS OF PHILOSOPHY

Over the last two decades, environmental ethics has arisen as a separate discipline in applied philosophy. Environmental ethicists and ecophilosophers often complain, however, that they are not having as much impact as they would like to have on the American psyche, much less on American treatment of the land and of the planet as a whole. Is there something the Christians can do better than the secular philosopher-kings of academia? Is there anything we have to add that would help our environmental response in our home communities or at the national and international level? If we look at the failings of ecophilosophy, we might glean some insights into potential areas where stronger theological response is needed.

•Obscure language

Anyone who has attempted to read the work of the philosophers will recognize their first problem. Their language is obscure, and they often make issues less understandable rather than more lucid. If we assume that solving environmental problems, such as water and air pollution, requires community cooperation, we need ethical principles that are as clear as possible. Although I think that the idea of Christian stewardship of the environment needs to incorporate several different ethical models or constructs, the general concept is easily understandable and will work to bring people

together at the community level. Christianity can also provide cross-cultural imagery and symbols that encourage love and respect for other people and for the creation.

• *Excessive abstraction*

A second failing of the philosophers is their tendency to produce abstract ideas without any actualization in the real world. For example, if I say a dolphin is my brother, does that mean I should help put him through college? Often philosophical discourse on the environment proposes an ideal such as "rights for natural objects" or "biocentrism" without producing a practical program for installing these in society. One advantage of approaches such as Protestant (or Catholic) asceticism or aesthetic spirituality is that they have a long history of practice and are not merely a discussion of ideals. Further, philosophy has spent most of the last two decades trying to prove the natural world has worth (the book of Genesis accomplishes this in a half dozen passages). The more important issue, however, is what defines right and wrong human action relative to the non-human portion of the cosmos and how to best share the creation with other people.

• *Lack of contact with nature and actual environmental conflicts*

One of my ecophilosopher friends, who has published many works in the environmental field and now has a university position teaching environmental ethics, has been heard to brag, "Why, I haven't been out in nature in twenty years!" This is essentially an intellectual "power claim" that the philosopher does not have to be in relationship with the world or with other humans to decide what is good for them. If we assume that right attitude towards the cosmos originates in a love for the Creator and for the creation, we could infer that the lover would constantly seek the beloved rather than proclaim that the beloved was no longer personally relevant.

Academic philosophy may also lose its contact with real people. In the class room distant from the minority neighborhood or the Sahel, those injured by hazardous wastes or displaced by African droughts become stockholders in a game of resource control. Deciding right action becomes a paper exercise where one plays God without ever having met a plastics worker with an environmental illness or without ever having seen the garden of a peasant farmer about to lose her land. One of the most marvelous things about the ministry of Jesus Christ is the way He went out into the world and met its needs and sorrows head on. Although we can fault Christianity also for having produced reams of paperbacks and very little improvement in the actual environmental state of the world, we can also name numerous missions organizations, pastors associations, farm advocacy groups, and educational institutions who have been solving real world problems and helping others even if it just in one local urban neighborhood, a single African village, or an isolated valley eroded by mining.

During the Third Reich, several well known non-Jewish philosophers, including Martin Heiddeger, one of the great minds of the era, stuck swastika pins on their lapels and accepted the advantages Nazi party membership provided in climbing the academic ladder. Most theologians also failed to voice ethical protests. But a few, including Dietrich Bonhoffer and Karl Barth, suffered exile or death in resisting the regime. I have often wondered if western philosophy's and theology's search for the ideal and the abstract didn't make them an easy conquest for Nazi rhetoric. In contrast to many of his colleagues, Bonhoeffer's understanding of ministry, discipleship, and community appears to have guided him away from complacency and toward a more strenuous effort to do the right thing—an effort that ultimately cost him his life. Although really engaging our contemporary environmental (and economic and social) problems does not necessarily entail the same level of risk, it requires conscious effort and social courage. Christianity's concept of being in relationship through ministry could be extremely powerful in solving environmental problems and in encouraging humans to share the cosmos among themselves and with God's creatures.

• Failure to deal with second and third order cases

Both ecophilosophy and ecotheology have a passion for seeking general models and have frequently failed to tackle specific ethical cases. A general concept, such as "rights for nature," is actually quite difficult to apply in our contemporary tangle of personal and social responsibilities. Christian ethics would do well to begin further analysis of well defined cases, such as moral responsibility in the cases of toxins exposure or the potential application of Christian virtues in the issues surrounding both waste generation and waste disposal. Single Bible passages or ethical constructs will not be adequate to wrestle with issues ranging from the impact of human population growth on both the world's resources and on family structure—to the continuing decline of our oceanic fisheries, to soil erosion and degradation in America's heartland, to the worldwide increase in species extinctions, to the potential for global climate change (and there are dozens more). Anyone who wishes to declare issues such as global warming a myth would do well to look at the contaminated forests and fields around Chernobyl, the devastated oyster fishery in the Chesapeake Bay, the air quality and asthma statistics in the world's megacities, or the watershed and agricultural management problems in the deforested uplands of Central America.

•Lack of respect

The last difficulty presented by the philosophical approach is it lacks respect for the wonder of it all. Unlike Jonathan Edwards, contemporary philosophy does not see the glory of the Creator in every leaf and every small, free-running stream. Christians

should know what we lose when we do not appreciate God's gifts for what they are. When our ethical voice is silent, others may fail to see the true value of all that God has wrought.

TAKING AN ETHICAL STAND

WESTERN EVILS

The ultimate destructiveness of the ecofascists should warn us about how easily good and evil roads may intertwine. Contemporary culture can also irrationally compartmentalize ethical issues and pursue death dealing policies for supposed national or economic gain. The keys to avoiding the ethical difficulties raised by ecofascism are:

- To make an effort to share the cosmos with other people and with other creatures. We should not take more than our fair share of the blessings God has provided. If an economic development strategy will leave other people hungry, or landless, the strategy should be reevaluated.
- To avoid environmental double-standards. If a toxic waste dump is a danger to a middle class neighborhood, it is an equal or perhaps even a greater danger to a poor neighborhood. If a polluting industry is too dangerous to place near our homes, it is also too dangerous to place near the homes of people in a developing nation.
- To avoid governmental, business, and personal activities or practices that endanger the lives or health of others. A company that illegally places hazardous chemicals in an open dumpster should be held fully accountable if children are killed or injured playing in the dumpster. A company that releases mercury which can cause massive central nervous system damage into ground water should have to pay the costs of the clean-up. We should all work together to reduce urban air pollution which injures thousands of children annually.
- To avoid governmental, business, and personal activities or practices that damage the livelihood or businesses of others. The fertilizers utilized on suburban lawns are presently reducing the water quality in the Chesapeake Bay which in turn threatens the catch of crabs, fish, and oysters—the livelihood of the watermen. Community response should protect the marine harvest and thereby the employment of the fishermen. (Note: this is an area of high conflict, because the interests of one business sometimes can negatively affect the interests of another.)
- To avoid activities or practices that reduce the productivity or fertility of the natural world or reduce its God-given species diversity. The decline of many marine

fisheries shared between nations, betrays human disrespect for a bounty created by God and available for peoples throughout the world.

- To avoid loss of natural beauty and of the "goodness" of the creation. The value of creation should not be restricted to its economic benefits and provision of the necessities of life, such as food, energy, and water. Christians should interact with nature in ways that appreciate the love and care of the divine hand.

ADDING TO THE PURITANS

In evaluating the American Christian heritage of environmental concern, I believe Worster's list of "formative Protestant qualities" betrays incomplete development of Christian environmental service. In fact, only half of each potential Christian contribution is present. *Activism*, for example, is part of what the New Testament presents as *ministry*. Activism implies initiating new patterns of civic response and revision of existing social behaviors. Yet Christian ministry also incorporates the day-to-day *routine environmental duties* that lack the excitement of activism. One would hardly identify the tasks of the first Christians deacons, such as Stephen and his friends who served at the widow's tables as activism. Yet this table service was critical to the integrity of the early church community. Much Christian environmental stewardship should fall into the hum-drum categories of proper resource conservation, waste disposal, and land and water protection.

In the midst of activism, it is easy to underrate the importance of developing environmental manners, habits, and personal values. These can be as simple as trotting over to the recycling disposal container and dropping reusable materials into it instead of throwing them into a regular trash can or encouraging kids to walk and ride their bicycles around the neighborhood instead of waiting for an automobile ride to the mall. Christians have found themselves in increasing turmoil over who teaches their children values and what values to teach. Children will learn from whomever they associate with repeatedly and from the society that they see around them. Since environmental values affect our treatment of our neighbors and our neighborhood, they belong in family, church, and school educational programs and in our routine household activities. Children can actually enjoy learning care for others and for the earth by crushing cans, helping in a family garden, cleaning up trash on a beach, or gathering materials for recycling.

Worster's second Protestant trait, *ascetic discipline*, must be balanced by what might best be termed *environmental creativity*. Not all environmental problems can be solved by self-denial. God-given imagination can and should be applied to reducing

toxic waste, eliminating air pollution, reducing the impacts of resource harvest, and hundreds of other problems. Although I think a revival of ascetic-discipline would do wonders for consumption-oriented techo-industrial culture, history reminds us that environmentally sensitive monastic communities and Christian farmers, through the centuries, have invented new ways to conserve soils or increase agricultural productivity. Imaginative conservation strategies will enhance restraint in resource use and discovering these strategies requires experimentation and positive action. Christians should encourage and participate in development of new and lower pollution energy sources, better methods of managing industrial by-products, and environmentally sound ways of improving production in agriculture and forestry.

Protestant hard work and a gnawing passion for progress can generate air and water pollution, toxic waste, and overharvest of natural resources when misapplied. Occasionally, it is time to enjoy what God has made without the unrelenting human attempt to improve on it. Hard work for its own sake quickly becomes greedy and begins to damage the interests of the greater community. Occasionally, we should stop humanizing every nook and cranny of the known universe, and stop and let the glorious works of God renew us.

Worster's third Protestant trait, *individualism*, must be balanced by *community participation*. While acknowledging the rights and integrity of others, Christians should develop community-based approaches to environmental issues. An easy way to pursue this is to ask, "What could my family do that would help to improve my community's environment?" The answer could be helping to develop a new park, organizing to stop toxic waste dumping near a school, cleaning up a polluted creek, or initiating a materials recycling program. Weak participation of churches and Christian organizations in environmental care undermines community from the start.

Christians also need to realize their potential for facilitating better environmental cooperation at the international level. Churches, denominations, and Christians organizations can assist by looking for ways to link Christians together to help tackle the most major and widespread environmental problems. Is there something my church, denomination, or Christian school could do to foster better international understanding of environmental issues? The answer could be forming a missions team to assist in land restoration in a poorer agricultural region, organizing an exchange program to train students in environmental issues, or even sponsoring an international conference to investigate the impact of urban air pollution on children's health.

Worster's fourth Christian contribution, *aesthetic spirituality*, tempts us to direct our attention only toward the beautiful and the perfect. The other half of the environmental

story is *attention to the unlovely and the neglected*, both of humanity and of the natural world. As the New Testament repeatedly informs us, in some cases, it is best to accept the damaged, injured, or less than perfect as they are. In other cases, we should offer restoration or healing to the starving child, the victim of an industrial spill, the deforested watershed, the overgrazed grassland, or the piles of tailings around an abandoned mine. Aesthetic spirituality not only understands divinely generated beauty in alpine landscapes or wind-swept ocean beaches, it projects God's beauty back into the ruined, abused, and degraded. Aesthetic appreciation should draw us into restoration. Is there a garbage dump or an abandoned tailings pile we can remove from the landscape? Is there a polluted stream we can make run clear again (and fill with flashing, silver trout)? Is there an overgrazed pasture or prairie we can grace with tall grasses and blooming flowers?

In summary, if we could balance the following Christian callings, we would almost certainly make environmental progress:

Ministry: *activism—continuing environmental care*

Personal values: *Ascetic discipline —environmental creativity*

Social relationships: *Egalitarian individualism —community service*

Understanding of God's role: *Aesthetic spirituality —attention to the unlovely, restoration of the damaged or degraded*

IMPROVING ON THE PHILOSOPHERS

In summary, the failures of the ecophilosophers can be corrected by Biblically-based ministry and appreciation of the creation. Christianity has historically had the kind of engagement with real world problems that provides exposure to nature and to the needs of others, as well as instilling the interest in community welfare that encourages the resolution of specific conflicts and cases. The Christian voice is badly needed in the environmental arena, and we are neglecting an important calling if we ignore the opportunities for developing a distinctive Christian environmental ethic.