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Christian Environmentalism: Cosmos, Community, and Place

John Wood, Janel Curry, Steve Bouma-Prediger, Mark Bjelland, and Susan Bratton

It is now clear that a sense of place is a human hunger that the urban promise has not met. And a fresh look at the Bible suggests that a sense of place is a primary category of faith.

—Walter Brueggemann

In July of 2003, nineteen Christian scholars gathered at Calvin College for a three-week intensive seminar entitled, “Christian Environmentalism With/Out Boundaries: Living as Part of God’s Good Earth.” The participants came from academic disciplines that ranged from ecology to history, from geography to communications. Several practitioners were also among the participants. The seminar was organized and led by an interdisciplinary team funded by a Council for Christian Colleges and Universities Networking Grant and Calvin College: John Wood (Biologist, Kings University College); Janel Curry (Geographer, Calvin College); Mark Bjelland (Geographer, Gustavus Adolphus College); Steve Bouma-Prediger (Theologian, Hope College); and Susan Bratton (Ecologist, Baylor University).

The key question addressed by this team and the seminar was: How can our understanding of self and our moral understanding be deepened to account for our membership in societies that are embedded in particular places, which are, in turn, embedded within ecosystems? This question reflects the challenge, within academia and the Christian community, of understanding humans as placed simultaneously within societal structures and within nature, in a way that neither negates the uniqueness of humans, created in the image of God, nor denigrates the value of God’s creation. The challenge is the full integration of humans, society, and nature into the vision of shalom that God intends—an integration that is crucial for our decisions on how to structure our lives in relation to God’s good Earth.

Our desire in this special issue of PSCF is to present some initial thinking from this ongoing discussion. All of these articles attempt to stretch our understanding of ourselves in relation to each other, to the earth, and to God. We begin by recognizing that we are members of societies that are embedded in particular places, which in turn are embedded within biophysical systems. We are earth creatures and place-makers, constructed from the bones of the earth. We are spatial creatures (i.e., Homo geographicus) embodied from planetary materials, not just knowing creatures (i.e., Homo sapiens). How can our moral understanding be deepened to account for these fundamental relationships? Is the full integration of human society and nature desirable, or even possible? Can the vision of God’s shalom be achieved, and if so, what might it look like when actualized on earth?

We start with stretching our theological and philosophical understanding of the meaning of humans being created in the image of God. Bret Stephenson,
Appropriate technologies can enhance the resilience of places. However, place is ignored in the prevailing paradigm of industrial agriculture, eroding the cultural and social resilience of communities and the ecological integrity of the land. This is being-with; all existence is co-existence, and all entities (human, nonhuman, technical) are part of a multiplicity of nonhumans with whom we share this common realm of creation. Yet the relational ontology is backed by a relational theology. In Christian terms, all being is who God is only by virtue of the relationship among the persons of the godhead. In his article, begins by acknowledging that we humans are interrelated with the nonhuman creatures with whom we share our home planet. He starts with the assumption that human personhood cannot be separated from our relationship with the multiplicity of nonhumans with whom we share this common realm of creation. Yet technology, primarily as it is employed in scientific practice, mediates between humans created in the image of God and the nonhuman creation. Stephenson employs Actor-Network Theorists (ANT) such as Bruno Latour and John Law, as well as Trinitarian theologians such as Colin Gunton and Loren Wilkinson, in an effort to open up an interdisciplinary dialogue among theological anthropology, the doctrine of creation, and sociological accounts of the technological practice of science.

**Perichoresis and Place**

Stephenson and several other authors in this volume work from the assumption that all entities (human, nonhuman, technical) are what they are only by virtue of their relationships to other entities. This is similar to traditional Christian claims about God, which have recently been emphasized by so-called social Trinitarians, namely, that God is who God is only by virtue of the relationships among the persons of the godhead. God is, in short, a community of Love—a family of interpenetrating perichoretic Love. A relational ontology is backed by a relational theology. In Christian terms, all being is being-with; all existence is co-existence, because the God who makes and sustains all things is a triune community of mutually engendering and indwelling love.

David Koetje tackles the hot topic of biotechnology, grounded in both this relational view of imago Dei, and also in a sense of place as a normative guide for negotiating our right relationship with the earth. To improve food security and environmental sustainability, it is imperative that we follow a paradigm for agricultural research and policy-making rooted in the places we seek to sustain. Place encompasses the ecological and cultural contexts of human enterprises. Appropriate technologies can enhance the resilience of places. However, place is ignored in the prevailing paradigm of industrial agriculture, eroding the cultural and ecological health of communities. This is a call to a different way of being in the world, where we are mindful of the relational connections that sustain us.
God's desire for human beings to flourish is subsumed within (but not replaced by) his desire for all of creation to flourish.

Dave Warners and Larry Borst explore this concept of "flourishing" by taking on one of the dominant and most powerful gods of our age—the god of More Stuff. Historically Christians have had difficulty formulating a widely accepted ethic and praxis regarding material wealth. In the Scripture, material wealth is described in terms of both blessing and caution. Koetje also puts value on the "community" as the place where these interrelationships are evident in the full flourishing.

Critique from an explicitly Christian perspective. In addition, she points out that our apparel binds us together socially and in powerful metaphorical ways as well. Apparel represents boundaries between us and nature and among humans.

Boundaries

The scientific enterprise is most often seen as a placeless activity, "the locus classicus of knowledge that is displaced, dislocated, disembedded." But as Livingstone has shown, the boundary between universal scientific knowledge and particular places is more fluid than we have imagined. Issues of boundaries are essential to developing a fully integrated view of humans, the earth, and God. Boundaries are constitutive of life and making a place necessarily involves choices about boundaries. Biologists sometimes speak of "skin-in" or "skin-out" phenomena, cosmologists model the edge of the space-time continuum, chemists partition matter along boundary layers, and engineers search for appropriate boundary conditions for all manner of processes. In the social sciences, geography is the quintessential boundary making and marking discipline. Feminism was built on recognizing the gender boundary as a primary driving force for ordering society. And other, more metaphorical views on boundaries "abound," so to speak. Personal items like clothing and houses serve to delimit space. These personal boundaries provide safety and shelter and offer a horizon or starting place for relationships. Postmodern thought is famous for locating and transgressing social and linguistic boundaries. So it would seem that nearly every aspect of human experience involves boundary making in some fashion. Christian understanding of the environment can be improved by careful thinking about boundaries.

David Clements and Wayne Corapi press us to ask an important question about boundaries: What is a weed? In so doing, they push the ever-present (post)modern issue of boundaries to the fore—the boundary between native and non-native species, between humans and nature, between the individual and a species, and among ecosystems. They present a case study from the Hawaiian Islands, which are extremely vulnerable to weed invasions. They ask: Should it matter to us that this "paradise on earth" is not as it was before these introductions? Do the original Hawaiian ecosystems possess greater intrinsic value than the new exotic plant communities? How do we deal with difficult issues of managing animals (e.g., wild pigs) for the good of an ecosystem? Invasive species are finding themselves in an increasingly borderless world, and as stewards of creation, human beings need to work on setting the boundaries. Restoration of the integrity of ecosystems parallels a broader restoration of society and brings glory to God. How we achieve this restoration in a particular place requires deeper thinking on our relation to all the creatures, and the history of that place.
Guest Editorial

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Finally, Dorothy Boorse raises questions about the nature of God’s plan for all creatures, but especially humans, within the context of this fallen world. She does this by addressing the important issue of anti-aging technology and the human quest for immortality. Current biomedical research shows promise for prolonging human life spans. Responses to these possible technologies vary from extreme caution, to exuberance, to a futuristic vision of humanity transforming itself. Boorse points out that the effect on the environment is unknown, but is likely to be an increase in individual consumption of resources by a few as well as greater gaps between the rich and the poor. She rightly identifies the connection between radical longevity and our view of the self, of humans in community, and our place in the natural world. The biblical norm is not technologically engineered longevity, but a faithful (finite) life of gratitude, joy, and shalom in the context of the relationships within which God has placed us.

Thinking on the Earth

Christian thinking—and environmental thought, in general—needs a deeper understanding of humanity’s relationship with nature as it is lived out in society and in communities—the link between philosophy/theology and the earth. These articles attempted to start with the assumption of the nonreducibility of morality, social structures, and the earth. This intersection has been increasingly identified as key to addressing environmental and social problems alike. Jeremy Rifkin in his book, *The Biotech Century,* states that the biotechnology issue exemplifies the intersection of morality, societal structure, and nature, yet we have no clear framework for their meaningful integration. Social theorist Robert Sack similarly identifies this intersection of morality, social structures, and nature as a crucial area for work. He claims that traditional moral precepts have focused on our relations to other human beings, but that this is an incomplete conception of our responsibilities. Moral concerns inevitably draw nature into the picture, especially because life is lived within the context of a place and its ecological circumstances. Sack’s attempt at building an integrated framework puts the self at the center of concentric circles representing meaning, nature, and social relations. Frameworks, apart from those that put humanity at the center, remain difficult to conceive, even though a sense of morality is recognized as being central to full integration.

Areas in which there needs to be more theorizing, and on which the interdisciplinary group continues to build are as follows:

- **Develop an integrative model of the relationships among God, humans and societal structure, and the earth** that is more complete and nuanced than we presently have. Such a model must move (a) beyond traditional concepts of human stewardship of creation to embeddedness in social structure and the earth and (b) beyond the human-nature split, evident in the dualisms of nature/culture and nature/history. Humans and their cultural creations are part of nature, and nature is historical.

- **Build on the assumption of the relational nature of human beings.** Many biblical scholars and Christian theologians now understand the “image of God” in relational terms, but we have yet to understand fully how this profoundly relational nature finds expression in not just human relations, but also in the relationship between humans and land.

- **Assume a covenantal perspective.** This perspective is an alternative starting point to the dominant Lockean contract perspective. The covenant is a relation between God and a people, but the parties to the covenant, unlike the parties in the Lockean contract, have a prior relation: the relation between creator and created. The covenant is also not a limited relation based on self-interest, but an unlimited commitment based on relationships of loyalty and trust. A covenantal perspective, with its emphasis on community and social obligations, provides a necessary corrective to the dominant individualism of a Lockean world view.

- **Recognize the interrelationship of all aspects of reality, drawing especially on the insights of modern ecology, in contrast to various forms of reductionism.** This will include the exploration of community conservation/political ecology and its models of culture and nature.
A revolution is occurring in Christian thinking on the earth. It is putting an emphasis on particular places, both near and far, and on humans as place-makers.

Many questions remain unanswered. We are only at the beginning. But a revolution is occurring in Christian thinking on the earth. It is putting an emphasis on particular places, both near and far, and on humans as place-makers. What sets this thinking apart from mere geographic speculation is the theological perspective that underlies it. We have a desire to find a place, a home, a center of being and community. We humans are place-makers, place-building creatures. And the act of making place is inherently moral. Only recently have we begun rediscovering the pervasiveness of place and its moral dimensions. Place has the potential to become a new window onto our relationships to each other, and to things that make up the natural world.

This greater understanding of place-making arises out of the growing Trinitarian dialogue that promises to reshape the way we see our relations to God, to the earth, and to each other. But it also reveals a deep human desire to be connected to each other and to the earth. In the biblically-informed language of the Christian tradition, how are we creatures made in God’s image rightly to fulfil our calling to be Homo faber in ways that make for shalom? How does this open and inviting communion, the open circle of the Trinity, extend to the rest of creation?

While the authors provide some hints of an alternative vision, much more needs to be said about what specific social arrangements and policies are most faithful to a Christian vision of shalom and conducive of healthy communities and liveable, neighborly places. What can and what should we do—in our homes, churches, cities, colleges and universities—to foster the kind of community that makes for a flourishing creation? How do we live, as Aldo Leopold put it years ago, as plain members and citizens of our biotic communities, rather than as conquerors? Or in more explicit Christian terms, how do we faithfully bear witness now to God’s good future of shalom—of a heaven and earth renewed and redeemed and transfigured?

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