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Respect for Life: Christians, Creation, and Environmental Ethics

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A PERSONAL STORY

I begin with some autobiography, hoping to conclude with an ethic for Christians, indeed for creation. I will move from the particular to the universal; if you like, this is a story of how living locally has led me to think globally. I am inviting you to see my experience "writ large" as promising for Christians who are asking what it means to reside on a good Earth.

Theology as biography goes back to Abraham, seeking the promised land, to Jesus, launching the Kingdom of God and setting his face toward Jerusalem, to Augustine in search of the City of God, or to Luther reforming the church in his experience of grace. Philosophy as biography has roots going back to Socrates, who "loved wisdom" by living out his protest against his native Athens. Socrates' key insight is that "man is a political animal," the animal who builds a town, inhabits a *polls*. Examining the character of life in this cultured environment is the time-honored mission of philosophers. For theologians, Athens is Jerusalem; they preach about life in this city-community.

The seminal theologians and philosophers of the past often formed their biographical creeds in a quarrel with their heritages, and in that I take some comfort. I have had to remind the political animal seeking the city of God that humans reside on a good Earth. Socrates so entwined his destiny with Athens, the city, that he left unexamined most of life; his biography ignored biology. "You see, I am fond of learning. Now the country places and trees won't teach me anything, and the people in the city do."¹ Quarreling

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In February, Holmes Rolston, III, Professor of Philosophy at Colorado State University, Fort Collins, came to Berkeley as the Spring 1991 J.K. Russell Fellow of CTNS. Following the pattern of his predecessors, Rolston's Fellowship Lecture was a personal and autobiographical statement about that which inspires his work and the questions that presently engage him. The lecture is a statement of his conviction that nature is sacred; it is valued by God for its own sake and in it God is revealed.

with Socrates, I found that the forest and landscape taught what city philosophers could not. Likewise, the theologians, searching for the City of God, seemed to have left the Eden Earth. I found that my biography took a turn away from culture back to nature. My calling was to lead culture to appreciate the nature in which we yet reside. The political animal still had an ecology. Aphoristically put, I was a philosopher going wild. I was a theologian who wanted to be worldly, earthy.

I started in physics. That seemed the science of fundamental nature, and I was and still am attracted by the physicist-philosophers probing nature in the very small and very large, microphysics and astrophysics, and by the cosmology that results from philosophizing over discoveries at these ranges. *Physis* is the Greek word for nature, and I needed a physics and, with it, a metaphysics. Perhaps there was nothing to learn from trees and rustic places, but there was everything to learn about matter-energy from cyclotrons and Geiger counters in town. This wasn't wild nature; it was mathematical nature. At the bottom of it all, there was ordered harmony, symmetry, universal law, beauty, elegance.

As an added boon, the same physics gave us power to transform the world. Was not the era of nuclear power,

electronic wizardry, and computerized information at hand? In the fifties, the humane city, fueled by science, was still a dream. So I set out to be a physicist, to understand and to remake the world.

Still, I seemed to get lost—lost out there in the stars, lost in the mechanics of quantum theory. In the fifties, cosmology dwarfed and mechanized humans; Earth was nothing but a speck of dust in galaxy after galaxy, a universe twenty billion years old, twenty billion light years across. The metaphysics that seemed demanded by the mathematical microphysics of matter reduced humans to less and less until they were nothing but matter in motion. I wondered. In those days physics had no "anthropic principle," little or none of the insight that it has subsequently developed about how even the microphysics and the astrophysics are remarkably fine-tuned for life at our native ranges.

As I wondered, some roots were growing and some seeds being sown. My childhood years were spent in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, where my father was a rural pastor; my first residence was among trees in a country place. Jump Mountain and Hogback were on the skyline; the Maury River ran in front of the house. There was no electricity; we trimmed kerosene lamps. Our water was a cistern pump outside and another cistern on the hill behind the house that flowed by gravity to the kitchen inside. Dad kept a large garden; there was a chicken yard, a wood pile. My mother was from an Alabama farm, and I spent a month each summer there, prowling the woods and swamps.

In college, though a physics major, I got entranced in a biology class taught by a first-rate entomologist. The other students considered him a buggy freak, but he saw things nobody else was seeing. I learned that you could see things in a binocular microscope that you did not catch in cloud chambers. Several of us went on extended field trips with him to the Florida Everglades. He kept vials in his shirt pockets, and instead of swatting the bugs, he popped them into formaldehyde for later examination. He could name the birds, the plants; I couldn't. Maybe I wasn't getting it all in physics; maybe, foundational though it was, physics wasn't really getting at the nature of nature. *Physis*, with the root "to generate," is not the only Greek word for nature, especially if such genesis knows only matter in motion. *Natura* is from the root "to give birth," to be native. Life. That was the problem with physics; it had none.

But I did not move yet into biology, or philosophy. I took a turn into theology. Lost in the stars, lost in mechanics, I was indubitably a Cartesian mind inhabiting matter—a spirit. My father, recall, was a Presbyterian pastor; my heritage was Christian, and why not study what nature really was—creation—and that meant learning about the Creator. So I went to theological seminary.

The trouble was I had to fight theology to love nature. In the Barthian climate of the late fifties, interest in a theology of nature was disreputable. Despite a remarkable volume on creation, Barth's answer to Brunner on the

possibility of natural theology was a resounding, dogmatic "Nein!" My seminary mentors agreed, and I was told to seek learning in linear history, not cyclic nature; the distinctive Judeo-Christian insight was holy history, *Heilsgeschichte*, redemption history. The creation stories were problematic myths, a primitive visionary ideal perhaps, but the truth was fallen nature, from which by God we are redeemed historically in the covenants begun in Abraham and the Exodus, climaxed in the launching of the Kingdom in Jesus' life and death, continued as we bring those revelations forward to orient contemporary society.

Biblical faith originated with a land ethic. Within the Covenant, keeping the Commandments, the Hebrew people entered a Promised Land.

Still I had a hankering after biology, when I set out to be a pastor in Southwest Virginia. But nobody who was anybody thought that these two would make a respectable combination. Biology, even more than physics, was an impossible science to reconcile with religion. Nature was red in tooth and claw, fallen; Paley's argument from design (a watch and its watchmaker) had fallen before evolutionary random mutations and survival of the fittest. There was neither creation nor Creator, only cold, fortuitous nature. I performed my roles as pastor, but inwardly I was searching. I remember once stumbling on a whorled pogonia in a secluded glade to exclaim, "Amazing grace!"

Partly to relieve the pressures, I took two days off each week, one to prowl the Southern Appalachian mountains, one to sit in on biology classes at a nearby university. Graciously, the science faculty welcomed me. I spent nearly a decade being a pastor, but becoming a naturalist, bringing in the Kingdom five days a week, going wild the other two. I learned the mountain woods in splendid detail. After the botany and zoology, came geology, mineralogy, paleontology. Now in my late twenties and early thirties, I was for the first time free of mentors telling me what I should study; I could figure this out for myself. I loved it; the trees and country places did have something to teach.

And I began to become alarmed; the natural world I had so long taken for granted, that once seemed so vast, was now vanishing with the surge of development. The sense of wonder turned to horror when I found favorite forests reduced to clearcut wastes, mountains striped for the coal beneath, soils lost to erosion, wildlife decimated. I worked to preserve Mount Rogers and Roan Mountain, to maintain and relocate the Appalachian Trail. The natural world didn't seem so graceless, and no sooner had I learned that than here we were, treating it disgracefully.

As yet I had read no philosophy, save for a few physicists turned philosophers. For the most part, I had been

warned against it. Though Barth knew European philosophy well, he did not like philosophy much better than he liked natural theology. But I began to wonder. Just as I earlier had needed a metaphysics to go with my physics, I needed a philosophy of nature to go with my biology. Denied a theology of nature, I took a philosophical turn. Though I had never formally even one course in philosophy I applied to graduate schools. Most turned me down. The University of Pittsburgh accepted me; and I was attracted there because of their strong emphasis in philosophy of science.

But now I had to fight philosophy as before I had to fight theology. Philosophy of science was one thing, really the only kind of philosophy that was reputable; philosophy of nature was disreputable. That seemed the consensus of the logical positivists, then in vogue. The best philosophers of science insisted that natural history was the worst kind of science. For my interest in it, I had to apologize. These hard naturalists were worse humanists than the theologians. Nonhuman nature was value-free, nothing but a resource for the satisfaction of human desires, abetted by the skills of science. Value was entirely in the eye of the beholder, assigned by the preference of the valuer.

In the moments when I could escape the philosophers and the theologians, there were the mosses. I had developed a particular interest in them because they are so luxuriantly developed in the Southern Appalachians, and also because nobody else seemed much to care about them. There they were, doing nobody any good, yet flourishing on their own, not listening at all to the philosophers and the theologians. Indeed, there the whole natural world was—flora and fauna, species and ecosystems, land and waters—all these timeless natural givens that support everything else, all prior to these arrogant humans who thought that man is the measure of things. The valuable world, that world that humans are able to value, is not value free; to the contrary it is the genesis of value, about as near to ultimacy as we can come.

My teachers all said I was wrong. Almost the first lesson in logic is the naturalistic fallacy; there is no implication from descriptive premises to axiological or ethical conclusions. But in the wilderness, hearing a thrush singing to defend its territory—maybe even singing because it enjoyed it—seeing a coyote pounce on a ground squirrel, spooking the deer who fled fearing I was a hunter, searching for signs of spring after winter, even peering through a hand lens at those minuscule mosses, I knew they had to be wrong. There was life abundant in the midst of its perpetual perishing. These creatures valued life, each in their own way, regardless of whether humans were around. Indeed, we humans were part of that history. A philosopher has to reckon not just with the *polis*, culture, but also with the *anima*, inspired matter, by which he becomes a philosopher. Something of the meaning of life does lie in its naturalness.

Although I loved the Southern Appalachians, when opportunity came I went west, drawn to the Colorado environment, and drawn to a university, Colorado State University, with a strong interest in that environment. Biology is taught in one way or another in twenty-three departments—botany, zoology, biochemistry, microbiology, forestry, fishery and wildlife biology, veterinary medicine, agriculture. Many other departments deal with conservation—natural resource economics, natural resource law and policy—but the university was without a philosopher interested in these domains. I ventured a class in environmental ethics; it filled at once.

I began to read Aldo Leopold and was struck with his land ethic. Ecosystemic nature did not seem "wild" in any bad sense, nor was it "fallen," nor valueless; to the contrary, it was a community of life with beauty, integrity, and stability. I asked "Is There an Ecological Ethic?" one that is philosophically respectable, and wrote an article in reply. I sent it at first to journals on the edges of mainstream philosophy, where I thought the chances of acceptance were better. It was rejected. I sent it, timidly, to *Ethics*, and, to my consternation, it was accepted almost by return mail. The question seemed to strike a chord with which others could resonate; the article was reprinted several times and since has been cited several hundred times.

That launched a career, with a deepening conviction that one measure with which philosophy is profound is the measure with which it can appropriately respect nature as complement to culture. No one can really become a philosopher, loving wisdom, without caring for these sources in which we live, move, and have our being, the community of life on Earth. And now I had also to bring theology into relationship with biology. That required a reinterpretation of some biblical sources.

II.

STORIED RESIDENCE IN PROMISED LANDS

Facing the next century, indeed turning the millennium, there is growing conviction that theology has been too anthropocentric; the nonhuman world is a vital part of Earth's story. Certainly in a century of two world wars, a great depression, a cold war, the threat of nuclear holocaust, civil rights struggles, and increasing secularization and alienation, there have been, and remain, urgent human problems with which Christianity must cope. It is now increasingly obvious, in addition, that environmental welfare is an inescapable part of our global agenda. Nor does this require simply the conservation of a desirable human environment; duty requires preservation of the natural world, the wild creation coexisting with the human community. In that sense Christianity, together with other faiths that influence human conduct, needs again to become a land ethic, to restore every living creature to the divine covenant.

Biblical faith originated with a land ethic. Within the Covenant, keeping the Commandments, the Hebrew people entered a Promised Land. That land is to be inhabited justly and charitably, and the twin commandments of Biblical faith are to love God and to love neighbor. Israel is to be a holy people, a righteous nation, and the principal focus of Biblical faith is not nature in the land, but the culture established there. At the same time the Bible is full of constant reminders of the natural givens that underrun all cultural achievements. Justice is to run down like waters, and the land flows with milk and honey.

Jesus says, "My kingdom is not of this world." ... his reference in "this" is to the fallen world of the culture he came to redeem... He teaches that the power organically manifest in the wild flowers of the field is continuous with the power spiritually manifest in the kingdom he announces.

The Hebrew covenant of redemption is prefaced by the covenant of creation. The Creator commands, "Let the earth put forth vegetation." "Let the earth bring forth living things according to their kinds" (Genesis 1.11, 24). The fauna is included within the covenant. "Behold I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you" (Genesis 9.5). To use modern terms, the covenant was both ecumenical and ecological. In subsequent developments, both Judaism and Christianity, emerging from Judaism, became more universalist and less land-based. In the Diaspora, the Jews were a people without a country, and, though this was widely regarded as tragic, Judaism remains a faith that transcends residence in Palestine. Christianity has often been regarded as more spiritual and less material, more universal and less provincial than its parental Judaism. Both these movements out of a geographically particular promised land, which are sometimes thought to make the land irrelevant to faith, can as well make every people residents of a divinely given landscape. In that sense the vision of many nations, blessed in Abraham, is inclusive, not exclusive. Jesus says, "My kingdom is not of this world." Teaching as he did in the Imperial Roman world, his reference in "this" is to the fallen world of the culture he came to redeem, to false trust in politics and economics, in armies and kings. God loves "the world," and in the landscape surrounding him Jesus found ample evidence of the presence of God. He teaches that the power organically manifest in the wild flowers of the field is continuous with the power spiritually manifest in the kingdom he announces. There is an ontological bond between nature and spirit.

The American landscape with purple mountains' majesties, its fruited plains, its fauna and flora from sea to shining sea is divinely created, no less than Canaan from the Negev to Mount Hermon. Exodus into a Promised Land has been a repeated theme wherever Judaism and Christianity have gone. All lands are to be inhabited justly and charitably, in freedom and in love. The divine imperative continues, addressed now both to Earth and to the humans who reside there, "Let the earth bring forth vegetation and every living creature." If this command was first biological, addressed to creation, it now also is ethical, addressing human duty. A people without a country is a continuing tragedy. Earth is a promised planet, chosen for abundant life.

Only humans are made in the image of God; and humans, placed within Earth, are placed over, not under, the nonhuman fauna and flora. Humans are to be free on Earth, to live under God, and to care for this creation. Animals are biologically equipped for the ecological niches they inhabit, impressive and satisfactory fits in their place. Humans are adapted for culture and inhabit the world ethically and cognitively. The animal lives within its own sector, but it cannot take an interest in sectors of the world other than its own; humans can and should care beyond themselves; they can espouse a view of the whole. Adapting Biblical metaphors for an environmental ethic, humans on Earth are and ought to be prophets, priests, and kings—roles unavailable to nonhumans. Humans should speak for God in natural history, should reverence the sacred there, and should rule creation in freedom and in love.

In Israel Biblical faith was a focus of national life, and often in classical Christendom nations claimed to be Christian. In modern eras, with increasing separation of church and state, the connections between Christian conviction and national policy are more indirect. The twentieth century has seen increasing privatization of religion, but the same century has brought increasing awareness that the natural environment is a commons that cannot be privatized. Religion may be personal, each with his or her own creed, but the environment is a public domain. In America a land ethic can and ought to offset the interiorizing of religion to the neglect of its communal aspects. Divinely given, earthen nature is the original act of grace. The commons is the fundamental sphere of divine creativity.

This divinely given natural world is also vanishing. Recent centuries, especially the twentieth, have dramatically increased the built environment, at the expense of the creation. After our generation comes and goes, Earth may not remain any longer, or may remain only in a degraded state. God made the country; humans have made the towns—and plowed the fields, and clearcut the timber, and dammed the rivers, and paved the roads. About 20% of the global land surface—almost all of the readily inhabitable land—has been drastically modified. In temperate countries the percentage of occupied land is much higher. About

96% of the contiguous United States is developed, farmed, grazed, timbered, designated for multiple use. Only about 2% has been designated as wilderness; another 2% might be suitable for wilderness or semiwild status. National forests include about 14% of the American continent; they are public lands, sometimes with impressive wildlife, but, being lands of multiple uses (multiple abuses!), they often have degenerate faunas and floras. We have only scraps of undisturbed once-common ecosystems, such as hemlock forests, or tall grass prairies, and no chestnut forests at all. Acid rain is impoverishing the Adirondacks and the Great Smokies. In the western part of the United States, our few old growth forests are being clearcut at the rate of 1000 acres each week.

Hardly a stretch of landscape in the nation is unimpoverished of its native species—otters and peregrine falcons, wolves and bison. The higher up the species on the ladder of creation (the ecosystemic trophic pyramid), the more likely this is so. Americans regarded it as their manifest destiny to conquer the wilderness, and with this came profligate wasting of resources and prodigal slaughter of wildlife. The big predators have been decimated; the bison roam the plains no more. The passenger pigeon is gone; bluebirds and many warblers are vanishing; we face a silent spring.

It is not simply what a society does to its powerless and oppressed people or future generations, but what it does to its fauna, flora, species, ecosystems, and landscapes that reveals the character of that society.

The natural world inescapably surrounds us, wherever we reside and work, and yet the built environment, necessary for culture, also is increasingly difficult to escape. Culture is and ought to be superimposed on the landscape, but not so as to extinguish wildlands and wildlife. This duty arises because of what the fauna, flora, and landscapes are in themselves, but it also arises because of human welfare. Humans need, in differing degrees, elements of the natural to make and keep life human. Life in completely artificial environments, without options for experiencing natural environments, is undesirable. A society attuned to artifact forgets creation. Life without access to the divine creation is ungodly.

A test of the abundant life in a promised land, as we inherit biblical faith today, integrating it with other faiths that fund an American land ethic, is whether a people can see the whole commonwealth of a human society set in its ecosystems, developing an environmental ethics. It is not simply what a society does to its powerless and oppressed people or future generations, but what it does to its fauna,

flora, species, ecosystems, and landscapes that reveals the character of that society.

Despite the twentieth century trend toward privatizing religion, national policy toward landscapes must involve collective choice producing a public land ethic. Some ethical choices are made by individuals, but in other cases citizens must choose together. In setting policy, citizens, including Christians who join other conservationists, can by mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon, do in concert what private persons cannot do alone. Christians, along with other interest groups, can unite to help forge this consensus. Christianity is thus forced to become public, in concert with many others, and to join in shaping the public ethic and reforming public policy. Decisions here must be political decisions; but they are also taking place in the midst of a philosophical and theological reassessment, coupled with ecological and moral concerns, about how humans should value nature. They are political decisions entwined with reforming world views.

III. DIVINE AND WILD CREATION

The Divine Spirit is the giver of life. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters" (Genesis 1.1). This Wind of God inspires the animated Earth, and "the earth produces of itself" (Mark 4.28; Greek: "automatically"). The days of creation are a series of divine imperatives. The wild creatures (as well as humans) are blessed and commanded to be fruitful, to multiply, and to fill the earth.

In contrast with the surrounding faiths from which biblical faith emerged, the natural world is disenchanted; it is neither God, nor is it full of gods, but it remains sacred, a sacrament of God. Although nature is an incomplete revelation of God's presence, it remains a mysterious sign of divine power. The birds of the air neither sow nor reap yet are fed by the heavenly Father, who notices the sparrows that fall. Not even Solomon is arrayed with the glory of the lilies, though the grass of the field, today alive, perishes tomorrow (Matthew 6). There is in every seed and root a promise. Sowers sow, the seed grows secretly, and sowers return to reap their harvests. God sends rain on the just and unjust. "A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever" (Ecclesiastes 1.4).

A pristine natural system is a religious resource, as well as a scientific, recreational, aesthetic, or economic one. It profanes such experiences and nature alike to see wild nature as merely resource, something like seeing God, or parents, or the sacraments as a resource. A forest, a mountain, a prairie is more than resource, instrumental to civilization, more than even a religious resource. It is

primeval, wild, creative source. Religious persons can bring a perspective of depth on wildland conservation. They will see forests as a characteristic expression of the creative process. In a forest, as on a desert or the tundra, the realities of nature cannot be ignored. The forest is both presence and symbol of forces in natural systems that transcend human powers and human utility. Like the sea or the sky, the forest is a kind of archetype of the foundations of the world. Forests and sky, sunshine and rain, rivers and earth, the everlasting hills, the cycling seasons, wildflowers and wild-life, hydrologic cycles, photosynthesis, soil fertility, food chains, genetic codes, speciation and reproduction, succession and its resetting, life and death and life renewed—all the central goods of the biosphere were in place long before humans arrived, though they have lately become human economic and social resources. These are the timeless natural givens that support everything else.

A pristine forest is prime natural history, a relic of the way the world was for almost forever. The forest as a tangible preserve in the midst of a culture contributes to the human sense of duration, antiquity, continuity, and identity. A visit there regenerates the sense of human late-coming and sensitizes us to our novelty. In the primeval forest (or on the desert or tundra) humans know the most authentic of wilderness emotions, the sense of the sublime. We get transported by forces awful and overpowering, by the signature of time and eternity.

"The groves were God's first temples."² "The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly; the cedars of Lebanon which he planted" (Ps. 104.16). With forests, America is even more of a promised land than is Palestine. John Muir exclaimed, "The forests of America, however slighted by man, must have been a great delight to God; for they were the best he ever planted."³ Such forests are a church as surely as a commodity. Trees pierce the sky, like cathedral spires. Light filters down, as through stained glass. The forest canopy is lofty; much of it is over our heads. In common with churches, forests invite transcending the human world and experiencing a comprehensive, embracing realm.

Forests can serve as a more provocative, perennial sign of this than many of the traditional, often outworn, symbols devised by the churches. Such experiences the churches should welcome and seek to preserve. Muir continued, "The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness."⁴ Christians may regard that as an overstatement; the clearest way into the Universe is through Jesus Christ. But Christians may also want to remember that Jesus Christ saw the presence of God clearly in the natural world in which he resided.

Being among the archetypes, a forest is about as near to ultimacy as we can come in the natural world—a vast scene of sprouting, budding, flowering, fruiting, passing away, passing life on. Mountaintop experiences, the wind in the pines, solitude in a sequoia grove, autumn leaves, the

forest vista that begins at one's feet and disappears over the horizon—these generate experiences of "a motion and spirit that impels... and rolls through all things."⁵ We feel life's transient beauty sustained over chaos. A forest wilderness is a sacred space. There Christians recognize God's creation, and others may find the Ultimate Reality or a Nature sacred in itself. A forest wilderness elicits cosmic questions, differently from town. Christians have particular interest in preserving wildlands as sanctuaries for religious experiences, both for Christians and others inspired there.

Values carried by wildlife and wildlands, like the values for which Christians stand, are in critical part noneconomic. Christians have often and admirably focused on economic values where humans have been unjustly deprived of these (jobs, food, shelter, health care). But in wildland decisions, where wildlands are proposed to be sacrificed to meet human needs, Christians should insist that these values be met instead on nonwild lands, on those enormous sectors of the continent that have been domesticated, and which are more than adequate to meet these needs, given a just distribution of their produce. Disproportionate distribution of resources among humans is not to be cured by further disproportion of the human built environment to the pristine natural environment. The values that Christians wish to defend on remaining wildlands are often the softer, more diffuse ones, and also deeper ones essential to an abundant life. Without these experiences, the land cannot fulfill all its promise.

A wildland is a wonderland, a miracle, standing on its own. "Praise the Lord from the earth you sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command! Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Beasts and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!" (Psalm 148.8-9). "Thou crownest the year with thy bounty; the tracks of thy chariot drip with fatness. The pastures of the wilderness drip, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing for joy" (Psalm 65.11-13). "Who has cleft a channel for the torrents of rain, and a way for the thunderbolt, to bring rain on a land where no man is, on the desert in which there is no man; to satisfy the waste and desolate land, and to make the ground put forth grass?" (Job 38.25-27). God not only sends rain on the just and the unjust; God sends rain to satisfy wildlands. God not only blesses humans; God blesses the desolate wastes. These fierce landscapes, sometimes supposed to be ungodly places, are godly after all. God does not want all these places subdued and cultivated; rather, God delights in places with no people!

That the fair land of Palestine, with its cities and fields, should again become desert and wilderness is a frequent prophetic threat. The collapse of cultural life in the promised land is indeed a tragedy, and in that sense a relapse to the wild is sometimes used in the Bible as a symbol for judgment on an aborted, promised culture. Jackals roam the

land, destroyed in punishment for sin. Such wildness is a tragedy only in foil to failed culture.

Certain Biblical passages suggest that the natural world is implicated in the fall, resulting from human sin. It is incontestably true that human sinfulness can affect the natural world adversely, and in that sense human redemption also brings restoration of nature. But these passages are not to be taken to suggest that existing wildlands are fallen. Additionally, a peaceable natural kingdom, where the lion lies down with the lamb, is sometimes used as the symbol of fulfillment in the promised land. This too is a cultural metaphor and cannot be interpreted in censure of natural history.

It profanes such experiences and nature alike to see wild nature as merely resource, something like seeing God, or parents, or the sacraments as a resource.

Taken for what it is in itself, prior to using it to symbolize human hopes and disappointments, wildness in the Bible is never a bad thing. To the contrary all creation is good. From this perspective, Christians can join with Aldo Leopold and his land ethic. "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."⁶ Those who wish to reside in a promised land must promise to preserve its integrity, stability, and beauty. "That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics."⁷ If so, we cannot inherit our promised lands until we extend Christian ethics into ecology. "The land which you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from heaven, a land which the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year" (Deuteronomy 11.11-12).

The nonhuman creation is wild, outside the hand of man, outside culture. But it is not outside both divine and biological order. The Creator's love for the creation is sublime precisely because it does not conform to human purposes. Wild animals and wild flowers are loved by God for their own sake. That God is personal as revealed in interhuman cultural relations does not mean that the natural relationship of God to ground squirrels is personal, nor should humans treat ground squirrels as persons. They are to be treated with appropriate respect for their wildness. The meaning of the words "good" and "divine" is not the same in nature and in culture.

Just as Job was pointed out of his human troubles toward the wild Palestinian landscape, it is a useful, saving corrective to a simplistic Jesus-loves-me-this-I-know, God-

is-on-my-side theology to discover vast ranges of creation that now have nothing to do with satisfying our personal desires, and that there were eons of evolutionary time that had nothing to do even with satisfying human desires. What the wildlands do "for us," if we must phrase it that way, is teach that God is not "for us" humans alone. God is "for" these wild creatures too. God loves wildness as much as God loves culture, and in this love God both blesses and satisfies wildness and also leaves it to its own spontaneous autonomy. To be self-actualizing under God is a good thing for humans, and it is a good thing, *mutatis mutandis*, for coyotes and columbines. That is the blessing of divinity in them. That the world is nothing but human resource, with nature otherwise value free, is sometimes taken to be the ultimately modern conviction, following which we will become fully human and be saved. It is in fact the ultimate in fiction, where the sin of pride comes around again to destroy.

"Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars, and spreads his wings toward the south? Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up and makes his nest on high? On the rock he dwells and makes his home in the fastness of the rocky crag. Thence he spies out the prey; his eyes behold it afar. His young ones suck up blood; and where the slain are, there is he. . . . Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it" (Job 39.26-40.2). "The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the badgers. . . . The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God. . . . O Lord; how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all; the earth is full of thy creatures" (Psalm 104.18-24).

In Earth's wildness there is a complex mixture of authority and autonomy, a divine imperative that there be communities (ecosystems) of spontaneous and autonomous ("wild") creatures, each creature defending its form of life. A principal insight that Biblical faith can contribute is a forceful support of the concept of wildlife refuges or "sanctuaries" in national policy. A wildlife sanctuary is a place where nonhuman life is sacrosanct, that is, valued in ways that surpass not only economic levels but even in ways that transcend resource use in the ordinary senses. In that sense Christian conviction wants sanctuaries not only for humans, but also for wildlife.

From a biological point of view, several billion years worth of creative toil, several million species of teeming life have been handed over to the care of this late-coming species in which mind has flowered and morals have emerged. From a political point of view, the American nation inherits a continent over which life has flowed for a thousand times as long as the nation itself has yet lasted. From a theological point of view, humans threaten the divine creation. These species belong not to us, either as persons or as a nation, but to God. There is something unChristian, something ungodly about living in a society where one species takes itself as absolute and values everything else relative to its national or personal utility. It is

more than appropriate for Christians to call for humans to respect the plenitude of being that surrounds us in the wild world, once so vast and now so quickly vanishing.

What on Earth are we doing? Humans cannot know what they are doing on Earth unless they also know what they are undoing. They can and ought to create their cultures, under God; but this ought not to be by undoing creation. Can humans genuinely gain by exploiting the fractional wilds that remain? What does it profit to gain the world, only to lose it—to gain it economically, to fence it in, pave it over, harvest it, only to lose it scientifically, aesthetically, recreationally, religiously, as a wonderland of natural history, as a realm of integral wildness that transcends and supports us—and perhaps even to lose some of our soul in the tradeoff?

NOTES

- ¹ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 230d.
- ² William Cullen Bryant, *A Forest Hymn*, 1825.
- ³ John Muir, *Our National Parks* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1901) p. 331.
- ⁴ Linnie Marsh Wolfe, ed., *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1938), p. 313.
- ⁵ William Wordsworth, *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*, 1798.
- ⁶ Aldo Leopold, "The Land Ethic," in *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949, 1968), p. 224-25.
- ⁷ Foreword, *A Sand County Almanac*.

CTNS Bulletin

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Volume 11

Number 2

Articles

Spring 1991 J.K. Russell Fellowship Lecture

Respect for Life:

Christians, Creation, and Environmental Ethics

Holmes Rolston, III

CTNS Research Conference with Holmes Rolston, III

Genes, Genesis and God in Natural History 1
Holmes Rolston, III

Reflections from a Molecular Biologist 24
Robert T. Schimke

Science, Selves, and Stories 26
Walter R. Hearn

An Axiological Perspective on Nature:
Value Vocabulary in Biology and Theology 32
Carol J. Tabler

Beyond the Genes: Epigenesis and God 34
Ted Peters

A Moral World "Red in Tooth and Claw" 36
Margaret R. McLean

Book Reviews

Explanation from Physics to Theology 39
by Philip Clayton Review by Mary
Hesse

Euthanasia and Religion 41
by Gerald A. LaRue
Review by Carl M. York

The Philosophy of Quantum Mechanics 41
by Richard Healey
Review by John Polkinghorne

Special Article
Games Physicist Play by 43
Dictrick E. Thomson

**CTNS Receives \$125,000 Pledge
from the Wayne and Gladys Valley Foundation** 45

From the Editor 46

From the Director 47

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