

# Introduction

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# Introduction

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THIS BOOK EMERGED FROM a series of public lectures in the spring of 2005 at Duke University that were jointly sponsored by the Nicholas School of the Environment and Earth Sciences and the Duke Divinity School.<sup>1</sup> The concept for the lecture series was to address the ethical dilemmas in the human destruction of biodiversity through a set of exchanges between scholars from different academic disciplines—primarily addressing Christian perspectives in the United States. This project is also the first fruit of collaboration between the Environment and Divinity Schools at Duke, the aim of which is to grow the scholarly interface between ecological science and moral and religious perspectives on conservation. As editors we also reflect this interface personally, since one of us is a conservation biologist and the other a theologian. We believe that this interface is of the utmost significance in making headway in the global ecological struggle.

A chief motivation for this volume is our belief that purely scientific descriptions of widespread ecological destruction are inadequate. In our experience, this is primarily because natural scientists can neglect non-scientific epistemologies and the human dimensions of ecology. This seems symptomatic of a larger failure to acknowledge humans as a member species of their environs, or as a constituent species of biological diversity itself, and hence scientific descriptions often place humans outside the domain conservation scientists want to save from destruction. A further problem with the scientific narration of environmental catastrophe is that it has proven a poor motivator of cultural change and of public participation in nature conservation (Van Houtan 2006).

1. Ethics and the Environment Lectures. See <http://www.duke.edu/web/ethics>.

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Our suspicion is that this is partly from the lack of attention to the human dimension, and in particular cultural, historical, and political perspectives, in scientific descriptions.

It is notable that nearly all of what conservation scientists call “biodiversity hotspots”—areas of combined biological uniqueness and endangerment (e.g., Myers et al. 2000)—have been colonized and administered by European powers over the last few centuries. A strictly scientific analysis of this difficult history neglects the cultural and political realities that are also implicated in the threats to biodiversity in these regions (Pimm et al. 2001). The genocide of indigenous tribes like the Huaorani in Ecuador accompanying oil exploration in the upper Amazon basin, the war and refugee crisis over mining and logging in west-African forests, the collapse of coastal communities from commercial overfishing in Polynesia, or totalitarian rule in the Indo-Burma peninsula are all symptomatic of ongoing postcolonial human injustice in areas which are also sites of high biodiversity. These crises indicate the problematic nature of the economic and political regimes imposed on many former colonial regions today by international financial institutions, and in particular structural adjustment programs which have seen large areas of forest and savannah converted to cash crops to meet punitive debt repayment regimes (Northcott 1999). Colonial and postcolonial governments have shown similar disrespect for the indigenous peoples who live in these regions, and have failed to recognize that indigenous guardianship of primal forests, ancient savannahs, and coastal estuaries has been more effective than colonial and postcolonial property regimes in preserving biodiversity. But the scientific construction of these areas as biodiversity hotspots or even “Ecoregions” (Olson et al. 2001) misses the vital role indigenous peoples have played as custodians in conserving the biological heritage of these regions. There is growing recognition among anthropologists and political scientists of the value of common property regimes and indigenous guardianship in conserving biodiversity while also providing a sustainable living for indigenous forest dweller and fisherfolk (Ostrom et al. 2002). But attempts to sequester nature from local guardians in the name of conservation still provide warrant for the continuing expropriation of “natural resources” by governments and corporations.

The concept of guardianship involves a very different understanding of the human relation to land and water sources, animals, fish and trees than the regnant accounts of private and state property rights in

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modern economic and political theory (Northcott 2006). Guardianship is a central and constitutive feature of common property regimes in indigenous cultures. In Western culture the most significant locus of accounts of guardianship are provided by religious traditions and sustained by participation in religious communities. But modern philosophers, like modern scientists, tend to believe that it is possible to narrate the human condition and nurture the young into full citizenship without reference to the ancient stories and traditions that have shaped earthly and human history. This neglect of predecessor cultures is ironically more pronounced in the United States, where, from the Puritans on, there has been an effort to reinvent the world without reference to the prior inhabitants of North America or even to the European past. This also helps to explain the profound role science has in framing the American story. Since Vannevar Bush penned his influential essay *Science, the Endless Frontier* (1945), governmental trust in science and technology has developed into a broad social optimism that science will take the lead in redeeming human structures.

The reality is that across the American continent there is a double ecological problematic developing. Within the continent, there has been a sustained assault against ecological diversity, and a looming and likely larger threat from global climate change. At the same time there is a sustained assault by conservative politicians, and by many of their conservative Christian backers, on such central pieces of environmental legislation as the Clean Air and Endangered Species Acts which are represented as unwarranted governmental interference in the rights of Americans to create wealth and enjoy their property unrestrained by public bodies or laws. In their view, such rights are inalienable, God-given, and grounded in the Genesis mandate of “human dominion.” But this interpretation of the Old Testament entirely neglects the dimension of covenantal justice and its ecological implications as charted by the Hebrew prophets (Northcott 1996). Novels like Michael Crichton’s *State of Fear* are powerful cultural exemplars of this problem, precisely because they refuse the link between individual or human welfare and the health of the biosphere. The central trope of Crichton’s novel is that global warming (and the ecological crisis more generally) are drummed up as apocalyptic scenarios by progressive politicians and liberal intellectuals who want to justify the continuing power and invasiveness of government and regulatory bodies on peoples’ lives and communities. For Crichton and his ilk the ecological crisis is a

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grand conspiracy whipped up by leftist politicians to justify their liking for governmental regulation of private property owners.

The Old Testament, unlike modern conservation biology, clearly narrates the connection between the tendency of wealthy private property holders to exclude the poor from their own environment and ecological destruction. In the postcolonial economic order an international corporate elite has increasingly taken hold of the political process to benefit their own interests in developed and developing countries. As in the empires of the old world, this new governing class of individuals is committed to the belief that the wealth of nations is advanced by the continuing amassing of power and wealth by the dominant institution of the market empire—the economic corporation. To its interest, everything else, including the poor and nonhuman species, must be subservient in the quest for the economic utopia to which borderless markets and global trade are said ultimately to deliver all human societies. The domination of government and the economy by a super-rich corporate elite fosters an attitude of dominion towards what are often called “natural resources,” and to the earth itself, which has advanced even faster the rate of destruction of biodiversity as well as human cultural diversity in the last thirty years. This attitude and the geopolitical strategies it advances have also fostered continuing growth in violent conflicts over resources in this new century, conflicts which are in themselves major ecological as well as human catastrophes.

As Jacques Ellul argues in *The Technological Society*, science and technology play an important role in the rise and dominance of the corporate elite (1964). The sacrifices imposed on people and planet by this elite are legitimated by the unquestioned presumption that economic growth combined with technological progress will ultimately redeem the human condition from want. The continuing affirmation of this credo despite the evident social and ecological failures of the present era strangely mirrors the fundamentalism and irrationalism of some of the religious perspectives that are frequently derided by this elite. And this is indicative that both scientific description and modern religious discourses have been infected by a monocular mindset which obscures the true multi-layered and multi-sensory structures of human knowledge and the connections between the ways in which humans acquire knowledge and skill and the larger-than-human world. But the scientific narrative of technological progress, combined with the claim that scientific data and description of-

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fer a privileged and direct access to the true or fundamental nature of reality, obscures the tacit way in which earthly bodies and rhythms shape and mould human consciousness and cultures.

In an important sense the modern claim to certain knowledge of the laws which govern the biophysical world produces a fundamentalist quest for certainty both in religion and in economics. Religious and market fundamentalists adhere to their own paradigms and interpretations of favored texts regardless of empirical evidence which may disconfirm long-prized shibboleths. Both kinds of fundamentalism reflect a modern quest for certainty as a competitive response and an apologetic strategy for the analogous veracity of their convictions and claims about the laws which govern the moral and social world which was in part provoked by the claimed certainties of natural science. But although the planet increasingly suffers from the ecological limits of its technological transformation and subjugation to modern scientific knowledge, few are prepared to question the underlying epistemological assumptions which inform the quest for certainty in the human and natural sciences, or in religion (Toulmin 1990). It is on this terrain, rather than in debates about cosmology and evolution, that we believe engagement is needed between ecological science, religion, and ethics of the kind we seek to advance in this volume.

The particular way we challenge the quest for certainty in science and religion in this volume is to look at the metaphors of dominion, destruction, diversity, and humility. When we read the great books of biology—Aristotle’s *History of Animals*, Linnaeus’s *Systema Naturae*, von Humboldt’s *Cosmos*, Darwin’s *Origin of Species*—we find the observer has a primal respect towards the world that transcends their own being, and that this is analogous to the orientation to the earth that is manifest in biblical cosmologies such as those of Genesis, the Psalms, and Job. This respect, which we might call awe or wonder, calls forth in the one who experiences it humility, a sense of their smallness in the scheme of things, and prudence in considering the possible systemic consequences of their actions in this scheme. And this sense of humility is in tension with the claim of modern scientists that their methods represent a master discourse which trumps the knowledge frameworks of other disciplines and other eras.

Our project is particularly timely given the increasing recognition of the role of religion in the formation of political policies concerning

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respect for the environment and the need to conserve it for future generations, and not least in the United States where religious mobilization remains strong. The extent of religious mobilization in the political realm in the United States since 2000, and the rise of the Religious Right, though it may now be on the wane, has nonetheless at last caught the attention of conservation biologists and climate scientists as witnessed by a recent editorial by David Orr in the science journal *Conservation Biology* (2005), and the many responses this essay spurred.<sup>2</sup>

Another significant feature of recent public policy debates in the United States has been a growing sense among environmentalists of all stripes that the traditional liberal approach to ecological conservation is not working and is losing public support. It is as if environmentalists are pushing the wrong buttons of the American psyche. There is too much bad news, too much emphasis on state intervention, and not enough discourse concerning empowerment and the roles of citizens and local communities, and not enough hope that it is possible to turn the direction of industrial civilization around (Shellenberger and Nordhaus 2004). For us this recognition is highly significant, as it interacts with our shared belief that we have inherited from wise teachers that it is only possible to build a good society when the individuals of that society are themselves good. In the world of ecological thought, that recognition requires a much more profound engagement between the procedures of science and public policy making, the promotion of respect for the environment, and the beliefs, practices, and rituals of citizens, civil servants, and corporate actors in all regions of the globe.

At a crucial moment in human and planetary history, we offer in this book a series of prophetic encounters between ecologists, theologians, and ethicists. Against the imperatives of the market and wealth creation we present wisdom from the emergent tradition of conservation science, and from the ancient traditions of Judaism and Christianity which have evolved over thousands of years, and which in that time, as the growing body of scholarly work in religion and ecology has demonstrated, have manifested an ecological sensibility and human welfare which we could call human ecology. Far from being a distraction from earthly things as some secular scientists and philosophers have claimed, traditional reli-

2. *Conservation Biology* included a special section in the issue following Orr's essay, devoted to the many responses to his essay. See *Conservation Biology* 19 (2005) 1685-98.

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gions manifest an ultimate concern with the co-flourishing of creatures, human and nonhuman, that neither scientism nor capitalism are able to sustain. To put this differently, scientists and policy makers cannot conserve without attention to the kind of religious and cultural dialogue that we essay in this book.

What we are suggesting in this volume is that a multi-disciplinary conversation offers a better description of the multi-layered world that we inhabit and the multiple ways our knowledge of the world enables us to live and flourish in it. In our present ecological crisis both Scripture and empirical data require a larger multi-disciplinary vision which is open to mystery, metaphor, and analogy (Placher 1996) and which is also open to persons on the margins of human society, as well as nonhuman creatures. Such an approach should be prepared to see the fate of factory-farmed animals through the narratives of a persecuted church, to read a biodiversity hotspot from the perspective of a Huaorani indian, to see the soil through the husbandry of a rural farmer, to consider dominion through the humility of the Amish, or to imagine an Ostrich flapping its wings through the eyes of Job. Our approach challenges a narrow vision of life on earth seen reductively through disciplinary discourses and logics that are mutually incommensurable (Louth 1990). It is for these reasons this volume pairs experts with different training and sensibilities. Such scholars describe situations differently, and these descriptions together bring forth a fresh humility, willingness to learn from one another, and wisdom. This is our project.

The biogeochemist William Schlesinger opens the book with a personal narration of environmental awakening of the 1960s and a plea for political cooperation between scientists and persons of faith. Schlesinger's main context is the issue of climate change, or global warming, as he has studied the nitrogen and carbon cycles for decades, seen dramatic shifts in the data sets firsthand, and is somewhat beleaguered that this science has not produced appropriate public concern and policy. Schlesinger the scientist views the ethical landscape and wonders why Christians (in particular) aren't doing their part. They might. The philosopher Jeffrey Vickery responds to his essay and explains that science is only part of the story, and it fails as a worldview to inspire social change because it has no anthropological story. Science has no account of redemption.

In the second chapter, the religion scholar Lisa Sideris examines how Darwinian evolution raised theological concerns about theodicy, or the

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“problem of evil.” For Darwin and many others, his findings raised the question of the beneficence of God as Creator, given the levels of cruelty and suffering involved in the origin and evolution of species. For Sideris the answer to this conundrum is that God does deliver us from evil, but that God does this through suffering. By contrast Sideris finds that many attempts to engage the ecological crisis theologically too often fail to take seriously the level of suffering that Darwin finds in the history of life, and that they rely instead on a romanticized biblical account of the world. Only by taking seriously the redemptive character of suffering in the Christian tradition, and in other theological traditions, is it possible according to Sideris to reconcile a Darwinian notion of evolution and traditional theism. The ecologist Norman Christensen responds through his experience of chairing a federal panel to manage Yellowstone’s elk population after widespread fires in 1988. To Christensen, theologians are not alone in their struggle with suffering. Ecologists have long wrestled with animal suffering, and particularly how to manage carnivores. He reminds us that Darwin, unlike his competitor Lamarck, uses the word function over purpose. This, Christensen offers, should help us recognize that science will always be mute to certain questions, but that does not mean humanity does not ask them.

In the third chapter the cultural anthropologist Michael Jackson argues that human knowledge is far more limited than modern scientists imagine. Consequently it is still necessary for modern humans to attempt to conserve and guard their ecological heritage on the basis of imperfect knowledge. For Jackson nature is profoundly ambivalent towards human-kind—it both gives and takes away life. And human actions have far less significance in the larger scheme of things than most moderns would attribute to them. In this sense they do not differ as much as moderns imagine from the “magical” thought of indigenous shamans in Australia or Borneo. The indigenous shaman and the Western celebrity scientist are both motivated by the same instinct: to do something. One of us, Kyle Van Houtan, agrees with Jackson’s critique of the position that “Man is the measure of all things” and appreciates the humility in which Jackson approaches knowledge. Scientists could listen more to these lessons. But Van Houtan argues that Jackson’s view leaves little room for what we the editors, and many others, call ethics.

The agrarian philosopher Norman Wirzba argues in the fourth chapter that it is impossible to understand how human beings cultivate

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such moral virtues as humility and gratitude apart from an agrarian appreciation of the cultivation of food and the tending of the soil. However much modern urban humans live apart from this seminal relationship to the soil they are still biologically sustained by what they eat. And unless they know what they eat, and where and how it is grown, they will be cut off from a significant source of their own identity, and their moral formation as embodied creatures. The ecological problem for Wirzba arises in particular from the disconnect between the modern epistemologies of food and place and the sustaining rituals of everyday life. For Wirzba, understanding these deep links evokes gratitude that can help to translate a conceptual knowledge of ecological problems into meaningful actions. As a biogeochemist, Schlesinger is sympathetic to Wirzba's argument of understanding our biochemical dependence on nature's cornucopia. But Schlesinger is no romantic and not preoccupied with nostalgia for times past. Surely, Schlesinger suggests, we cannot all return to the farm, or even maintain gardens to supply our own personal needs. The world has grown past this. We can however still inculcate humility towards nature through other practices, including the practice of science.

Michael Northcott in the fifth chapter notices a deep paradox in the lives of apocalyptic conservative Christians who develop industry and business to accumulate wealth for a future they consider will soon end in apocalypse. They both do and do not live like there is no tomorrow. He suggests that the cultural power of contemporary apocalyptic Christianity produces a public theology of dominionism which has in the recent past in the United States legitimated highly damaging attitudes to the non-human environment. Northcott argues that apocalyptic Christianity is a perverse variant of historic Christianity and that it is the consequence of a collusion between capitalist ideology and evangelical individualism. He then narrates the Christian practices of confession and repentance as an alternative response to the ecological crisis that this curious combination of ideas and practices has helped to sustain. The atmospheric scientist Rob Jackson responds by enumerating how biblical miracles have been replaced by science and technology. Manna no longer comes from Yahweh, but Montana. Water does not miraculously flow from a desert rock, but from hydraulic well pumps. By narrating our history of earthly dominion and control, Jackson believes that it is still possible to find humility from within modern science.

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In chapter 6, the art historian Susan Bratton analyses the politics of the early Christian church through the paintings on the walls of the catacombs in Rome. The images she describes are Edenic and point to an afterlife through images of birth, fecundity, peace in human society, and fellowship with the rest of creation. Bratton suggests that this legacy demonstrates a resistance to the dominant values of Roman Empire as manifest in the glorification in Roman art of hunting, military prowess, and mighty beasts. And as Christianity becomes the cult of the Roman Empire after Constantine, Bratton finds that the empire infects Christianity, and Christ is increasingly portrayed as a worldly emperor whose followers enact the same rituals of killing and power as the emperors of Rome. The artist Makoto Fujimura responds to Bratton through his experience of being commissioned to compose funerary paintings for the Columbine High School shooting tragedy in Littleton, Colorado, in 1999. He describes one of his paintings, and particularly his inspiration to portray the confession of faith of one of the murdered girls. Like Bratton, he sees this as truth-telling that “maintains the bonds between the heavenly and earthly realms.” And such truth-telling performs a true dominion by transforming a funerary work into a celebration of life—one that is and is yet becoming.

In chapter 7, Van Houtan and Northcott examine the ambivalent legacies of John Muir and Gifford Pinchot in order to provide an insight into American environmentalism. They find that Wendell Berry’s agrarian ethics indicates the inadequacy of Pinchot’s utilitarianism and Muir’s wilderness fetishism. But they suggest that Berry’s agrarianism is insufficient and requires some account of the way in which the communities of the kinds of people who do live sustainably on the land—such as the Amish—are formed, and how modern forms of statist and corporate farming are deformed. With the Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder they argue for a robust account of sin that explains humanity’s descent from responsive dominion to destructive domination. And they argue also for the significance of what Yoder calls “body politics” as the means by which humans can be formed in communities which are at peace in themselves and with the more-than-human world. The historians of American Christianity Seth Dowland and Brantley Gasaway write in response that both conservative and liberal American evangelical Christians have concepts of environmental stewardship. They describe the development of the Evangelical Environmental Network, which they characterize as “servant

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stewardship,” and the Interfaith Council for Environmental Stewardship, which, in Orwellian fashion, characterizes itself as “caring dominion.”

The theologian Laura Yordy argues in the eighth and final chapter that the theological themes of eschatology and redemption are central to the church’s practice of biodiversity conservation. Yordy easily moves from the biblical stories to the present day arguing that all species take their ultimate meaning from a triune God who created them in mutuality, relationship, and peace. Creatures still show God’s goodness, but this is dimmed and can only be fully restored by God’s eventual work to redeem all of creation. Though this cannot happen by human efforts, it does not diminish human conservation efforts. Instead Yordy suggests that local parishes are capable of taking a lead in caring for creation and thereby working for the *Shalom* of creation in the here and now. The conservation biologist Fred Van Dyke responds that Yordy too easily accepts the ethics that scientists put forth. Van Dyke suggests the conservation community lacks a robust concept of species as creatures and merely considers them a part of the evolutionary process. For species, death is certain. Why bother with conserving them? All creatures, according to Van Dyke, have an ultimate significance. Acting in such a way as to conserve them is to act in accordance with the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, which is the definitive event in which Christians discern from within human history that life and not death is the end of all things.

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