Nature, Resources, Environment, or *Creation*: Foundations for an Earthkeeping Ethic

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The environment is back, as a legitimate issue for concerned people to be concerned about. Of course *the environment* itself never went anywhere. But after a few years in the media-sun (remember *population explosion, energy crisis, bio-degradable, cleaning up our lakes and rivers,* and a dozen other phrases from the marketplace of a couple of decades ago?) such issues were eclipsed as though the problems they reflected went away.

Just as the environment has not gone anywhere - neither have the problems. Indeed, in the last few years a whole range of big and little crises have made it once again hot media copy. Chernobyl, the Valdez Oil Spill, the greenhouse effect (present or anticipated), the hole in the ozone layer (back this year over the Antarctic, deeper than ever), and in our part of the world, the rapid disappearance of old-growth forests - all these remind us that we are still in some sort of environmental crisis.

In this second wave of environmental concern, neither the environment nor the problems have changed substantially. But after twenty years, some things *are* different. First: fifteen years ago we heard a lot more about shortages. The Club of Rome report *Limits to Growth* made a big impact. *Natural resources* were a main concern. Almost on cue, problems in the Middle East curtailed the oil supply to the U.S. and seemed to make the predictions

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that the supply would run out come true almost immediately. But a few years later North America had a (short-term) oil surplus, a fact which cooled off public interest in the environment and in conservation. So that is one difference: this time around we are hearing less about *natural resources* and more about *the environment.*

A second difference is that the awareness that we live on a limited planet has sunk much more deeply into peoples' minds. The words *earth* and *planet* occur much more in both popular and serious discussions. Also the word *Gaia*: James Lovelock's book *The Gaia Hypothesis* appeared in the early seventies. It drew on our rapidly expanding knowledge of the atmospheric chemistry of other planets in order to argue (quite convincingly) that there was something very odd about the composition of the earth's environment, both air and oceans. That environment (the balance of gases in the atmosphere, the salinity of the oceans) has held constant over many million years in a way that can only be explained by saying that living things themselves are regulating it - indeed, that the aplanet itself is a great organism. So *Gaia*, the ancient Greek word for the goddess of the earth, has escaped both from Greek mythology and from esoteric discussion of atmospheric chemistry and has made it into daily conversation - at least in New Age circles.

Indeed, concern over the earth has become part of a new religious concern - almost a new religion - which deliberately seeks older - pre-modern, pre-Christian - sources of nourishment. Many are trying to piece together a twentieth-century faith made up of patches of Taoism, Native American religion, goddess religion, witchcraft (*wicca*) and occult lore, all stitched onto a backing of good old-fashioned pantheism. Indeed, the main religious option nowadays (at least on the West Coast) is a form of nature worship in which human consciousness is seen as a

well down into the divine: something like a mind for the inarticulate goddess Gaia, the earth.

This brings me to the third important difference in this latest version of the environmental crisis. Not only is it more concerned for environment than resources; not only does it elevate the earth, Gaia, to something like sacred status; also, not surprisingly, it is increasingly critical of that Jewish and Christian tradition which has strongly argued that creation is not to be worshipped but that rather we should worship the Creator. For example, a few weeks ago a local newspaper did a major series on the environment. An article on religion argued that "the blame for the ravaging of earth can be squarely placed on the Judaeo-Christian religious belief that nature exists to serve humans and support civilization." It quotes the president of Canada's Royal Society to the effect that "God's admonition to Abraham in Genesis to be fruitful and multiply - using the earth and its plants and animals - was the beginning of exploitation and dominance by humans over creation, and is the basis of Christianity, Judaism and Islam."

As a Christian who for many years has been thinking and writing about the environmental implications of Christian faith, I find this idea both familiar, and continually astonishing. The central Christian belief is that the Creator was, in Jesus Christ, uniquely present to his creation - but not as despot. Rather, he said, "I am among you as one who serves." That attitude of service and humility is most starkly represented in the central Christian symbol, the cross. Christians believe that the Creator suffered in and for creation, crucified as a ravaged forest, an oil-soaked otter, a starving peasant may be said to be crucified by institutionalized human greed. Christians also believe that in a mysterious way the Creator has turned his suffering and death into triumph, vindicating the whole creation in the resurrection.

I would like to return shortly to a consideration of the environmental implications of Christianity. But let me for a few moments come at the issue in a different way.

We have a great deal of trouble in finding language to talk about the sort of crisis we are in. How do we refer to the thing that is threatened? By a sort of media consensus we have settled for the time being on *the environment.* But that is just the most recent name for this teeming, rich mystery that surrounds us and it is a rather arid and eviscerated word at that. This richness is reflected in the continuing astonishment of the biologists who study the unending diversity of the make-up and inter-relationships of the planet's 10 to 40 million species.

The spiritual and imaginative poverty of our age is suggested by calling all of this *the environment.* We simply do not know *what* to call it. There are other names. To recall them is to rehearse the history of our conscious relationship to the thing we are trying to name.

One of the most common - and one of the oldest - is *nature.* The word has a complex history: see, for example, "Nature" in C. S. Lewis's *Studies in Words*, and Clarence Glacken's *Traces on the Rhodian Shore.* Certainly by the time of Aristotle it had become not only a kind of synonym for "everything that is," but also a kind of personification. In Stoic thought that personification was more advanced: *nature* was the guiding principle of the universe, almost a kind of soul for the spherical beast of the universe. To act "according to nature" was the goal of all good men, but that was not a passive thing: it was rather to obey the "seed-like word" of the *Logos*, a further synonym for nature, which guided all things but particularly human beings. (There are many parallels between Stoic thought and much of the emerging *Gaia*-religion of "Deep Ecology.")

Through the Christian Middle Ages this sense of nature as a kind of person, incarnate in the physical earth, persisted, trailing bits of Aristotelian philosophy, Stoicism, and remnants of Northern European animism. It persisted in uneasy relationship with Christianity. On the one hand God was accepted as the Creator of heaven and earth. On the other hand, *Nature* was regarded as a kind of personal fecundity underlying not only the inexhaustible fertility of plant and animal life, but also nurturing mineral life - gold, silver, diamonds, rubies - in her womb.

Carolyn Merchant in her excellent book *The Death of Nature* has catalogued how this genial conception of *Nature* - quite specifically *Mother* Nature - came under attack in the seventeenth century (Merchant 1-41). She singles out Francis Bacon, the father of the inductive method, as the chief villain, and argues convincingly that Baconian language about "putting nature to the test" and "wresting nature's secrets from her" is suspiciously like contemporary language associated with witch trials.

Bacon and others in the scientific revolution were justifiably wearied of the way in which medieval deductive conclusions about Nature's way obscured study and understanding of the actual mechanisms of the physical world. And they unquestionably swept away older understandings of nature in the name of a Christian understanding of the Creator. Indeed, much of the success of the scientific revolution can be understood by the substitution of the idea of nature as an artifact, a machine, made by the divine craftsman whose laws we can discern, for the idea of nature as an organism, a kind of self-generating presence whose integrity we should respect (as we would a mother's) by not prying too deeply into her intimate secrets. (See R. Hooykas, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science* for a good discussion of the contributions to human well-being of the Baconian inductive approach to learning about creation.)

Unquestionably an important theme in the contemporary questing for a new religion is the attempt to go back behind what is regarded as the violations of the integrity of nature by human thought - variously castigated as analytic, inductive, left-brained, Baconian, Cartesian, or manipulative - to the godlike presence many are now calling *Gaia.* In such an attempt to recover *Nature* it is fashionable to see only the dangerous aspects of its seventeenth-century de-personalization.

But in our enthusiasm for recognizing the excesses of the scientific revolution, we must not forget that it is precisely the understanding of nature as an intelligible artifact (rather than a fecund mystery) that has enabled the very sensitivity which now lets us understand the workings of the planet - from plate tectonics, to atmospheric chemistry to the genetic code. Much of the current awe at "the environment" comes from insights which have been gained through precisely the kind of thinking about nature which is being criticized. More specifically, it was the ascendancy of thinking of nature as the work of a creator, and hence intelligible by human beings made (in some way) "in his image" which enabled us to begin (in Kepler's words) to "think God's thoughts after him," and thus to gain the kind of understanding of nature which now fosters such concern.

On the other hand, we dare not ignore the dark side of the Baconian understanding of nature. From the beginning it was concerned with power. We cannot lightly criticize the benefits of such power (without it most of us would have died before we reached the age of five). But we must recognize that the whole scientific project has been closely connected from the beginning not only with the joys of pure science but also with the simple concern to find things which increase human power and well-being.

And this leads to the second word for the earth which I would like to consider, much more briefly: *resources*, or more commonly, *natural resources*. One of the offspring of the scientific revolution was the industrial revolution. By it, in the past two centuries the planet has been transformed - and threatened - by our increasing ability to use it as a storehouse of raw materials, and a sink for human waste. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the earth was divided up by the industrialized powers of the western world, and they did so not by thinking of the earth as *nature* or *environment*. Rather, they considered it as *natural resources*: coal, wood, mineral ores, oil - even human labour. Marxist thought attempts to explain most of recent history in terms of the struggle to control natural resources. I do not want to enter into that debate (which seems to be coming to a non-Marxist end), but both capitalism and Marxism regard the earth primarily as natural resources.

This way of thinking has persisted until quite recently. The early years of what is now known as *the environmental movement* made much use of the concept of *conservation*. Conservation of forests, soils and water, was the goal - especially in the dust bowl years of the thirties in North America. But it was always conservation for the purpose of human use. *Natural resources* was still the category under which nature had come to be considered.

Thinking of the earth - or nature, or natural resources - as *environment* is quite recent. The environmental movement can probably be traced most specifically to Aldo Leopold, the American *conservationist* who was equipped not only with the new science of ecology, but also with a poet's sensitivity to the newly awakened religion of nature nurtured by American transcendentalism (Emerson, Thoreau, Muir) and by Romanticism.

Leopold had an ecologist's insight into the mechanisms of *the environment* -and a poet's sensitivity to the beauty - and even the religious meaning of those things which could on one hand be described as mechanisms. Leopold's *Sand County Almanac*, published posthumously in 1949, is unquestionably the most important single document behind modern environmental understanding.

Leopold's understanding of the environment has become commonplace, at least in the environmental movement. Although he drew heavily on the analytical tools which came from the seventeenth-century understanding of nature as the intelligible work of a creator, he also was heavily critical of what he perceived to be the arrogance behind those understandings. Thus in his preface he makes an observation which both signals the transition from resource thinking to environmental thinking - but also, sets the tone for the negative assessment by the environmental movement of the biblical world-view: "Conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land as a commodity belonging to us" (Leopold xviii).

Elsewhere, Leopold expands on what he means by "the Abrahamic concept of land":

> Abraham knew exactly what the land was for: it was to drip milk and honey into Abraham's mouth. At the present moment, the assurance with which we regard this assumption is inverse to the degree of our education (Leopold 240).

Leopold would be pleased to see (as I am pleased to see) how the main features of an environmental education have begun to take hold in modern culture.

Yet there is a curious flaw in the environmental movement, and it is suggested, I think, in the word *environment* itself. Just as *Nature* embodies aspects of pantheism which discouraged scientific investigation; just as *natural resources* is a term which rather arrogantly surveys the planet from the perspective of what will be useful for human need, so also there is a problem with the terms *environment* and *environmental.* Perhaps the problem is inadvertently suggested in E.O. Wilson's book *On Human Nature.* Wilson achieved some notoriety a decade or so ago as the father of sociobiology, that synthesis of biology and behavioral science which attempts to draw out the implications for human nature of a thoroughgoing scientific materialism. He argues that much of human behavior can be understood as simply one more genetically-selected strategy for increasing the likelihood that an organism will pass on its genetic material to succeeding generations. The same point is made more bluntly in the title of a little book by Daniel Kozlovsky published several years ago in the last wave of environmentalism: *An Ecological and Evolutionary Ethic.*

For the basic insight of environmental awareness is (in Leopold's words) that we are "fellow-travelers in the odyssey of evolution." As Bill DeVall and George Sessions put it in *Deep Ecology*, this implies "biocentric equality": "All organisms and entities in the ecosphere, as parts of the inter-related whole, are equal in intrinsic worth" (DeVall and Sessions 67). But that profound inter-relationship suggests the problems with environmental language.

To return to Wilson's sociobiological analysis: there are, he says, two dilemmas resulting from such an understanding. The first is that "We have no place to go." In his words, "no species, ours included, possesses a purpose beyond the imperatives created by its genetic

history .... The species lacks any goal external to its own biological nature" (Wilson 2-3).

The next dilemma is more subtle: if our very values and attitudes are shaped by our evolutionary history, then we cannot trust them. They too are part of the great flux and flow of nature. Wilson is most explicit in directing this sort of reductive criticism against religion. But he fails to draw the obvious conclusion: if religion and ethics are environmentally determined (evolutionarily determined, that is to say randomly determined) then science is also one more part of the environmental ebb and flow, no more or less important than the feathers on a peacock. That includes the sort of science which says that we are simply one more part of this cosmic discontinuity to which we have been referring as nature, or natural resources, or the environment.

Whose environment? For either we mean *our* environment, the human environment, and thus re-introduce the kind of anthropocentrism against which environmentalist criticisms of the Judaeo-Christian tradition are directed - or, we remove any place to stand in looking at, or thinking about, or acting in, this whole discontinuity we have been trying to name. We cannot have it both ways. We cannot criticize the Judaeo-Christian tradition for saying that there is something special about being human, and then say that we are "entrusted with the stewardship of life on this planet," as though there were something extraordinary about being human.

Thus we see that speaking of the earth as *environment* raises problems as profound as calling it *nature* or *natural resources.*

Which brings me to the main, and concluding, point of what I have to say. All these names for the earth, the

universe, "the whole show," are flawed. *Nature* invokes a great earth-mother goddess, who is to be worshipped but not studied or used. (The pioneers of science and technology were right to move away from such an understanding.) "Natural Resources," on the other hand, invokes a humanity-centred nature which is reduced to tool-box, treasure-house, or fuel-tank for human purpose. Environmentalists were right to move away from such a conception. But *environment* is either equally anthropocentric *or* it undercuts our place to stand by making us simply part of the environmental flux, thus removing any validity we have in talking about anything.

What are we left with? What language can we use to speak of nature, resources, or the environment?

I propose "creation," biblically understood. In that biblical picture, everything in the universe is the result of the purposeful, willful act of an intelligence who, while existing independently of that universe, is at the same time intimately aware of, and involved with, each part of it.

The opening verses of Genesis express one aspect of this relationship, what theologians have abstractly called God's transcendence: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." But other passages - such as Psalm 104 - express what theologians have with equal abstraction called divine immanence: creation is presented as God's action *now*:

He makes springs pour water into the ravines. . . .
He makes grass grow for the cattle
and plants for man to cultivate. . .
Makes wine that gladdens the heart of man.
When you send forth your Spirit [says the Psalmist of all things] they are created, and you renew the face of the earth.

Contrary to deist (and some fundamentalist) notions, God did not *make* the universe and withdraw; he *is* intimately involved with all of it at every instant: as the Gospel of John re-states it, "through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made."

Nor, might I add, does anything in this understanding of creation go counter to the immense periods of time, the slow process which our investigation of creation reveals. Creation can be trusted as to what it reveals about itself.

Finally, Christians believe, this intimate involvement of the Creator with his creation is seen most clearly in Christ, in the cross, where God took upon himself the pain of creation; and in the resurrection, where God points to the restoration and everlasting worth of what he has made.

Thus, I suggest, creation is a better way to think about all that is. And it provides a firmer footing for ethics than *nature*, *resources* or *environment*. Let me conclude with a few observations about the implications of this Christian understanding of the human place in creation.

First, things have value *because* they are created, not because they are humanly useful. Nothing in the Hebrew or Christian traditions suggests otherwise - though not surprisingly, many within Christendom have wanted to act otherwise. (Christians are sinners too.) If the repeated affirmation of creation's goodness in Genesis 1 were not

enough, we have God's answer to Job which amounts to a sort of guided tour of creation by the Creator in which stars and snowflakes and goats and crocodiles are recognized as valuable because God made them and delights in them - not because human beings can use them.

Secondly, within this valued creation humans have a unique worth because they are called into a unique kind of free responsiveness to the Creator - called even into a kind of secondary "creatorliness" of their own. There *is* something unique about men and women: it is their ability to see things from the standpoint of the Creator.

Thirdly, men and women have likewise a two-fold responsibility to creation: because all things are (as St. Francis reminded us) brother or sister-creatures; but also because like nothing else in creation such responsibility is a task given us by our Creator. Care, stewardship, is the way in which *dominion* is to be understood. Those who say that environmental problems are the result of biblical teaching closed the book too early. Chapter 2 of Genesis says that *Adam* (the word comes from *adamah*, earth, much as we might say *human* comes from *humus*) is to care for the garden. And the whole long story of God's dealing with humanity, culminating in the cross, says that for the Creator (and presumably for us, creatures privileged to be sub-creators), lordship is to be understood and exercised as service.

Fourthly, the culmination of creation (contrary to what many people assume) is not, in the biblical account, men and women: it is the Sabbath, about which the Bible has a great deal to say which we (outside the Jewish tradition) have found it very difficult to hear. The Sabbath is God's rejoicing with all his creatures in the unity and splendour of his creation (a unity and splendour which science increasingly reveals). And the Sabbath sets limits to human activity, places it all within the

acceptance of the goodness of creation for its own sake. Finally, for the Christian the Sabbath is reaffirmed in the Jubilee Kingdom announced by Jesus and confirmed by the resurrection (after which, by a profoundly correct mistake, Jesus was first confused with a gardener).

Thus we can speak of the value of creation - without worshipping it. We can see creation as something to be used - but not used up. It is rather to be used thankfully, caringly, joyfully, as a gift, within limits set by the Sabbath. We can affirm the appropriateness of human knowledge, study, stewardship, without making ourselves arrogantly something other then creation. We can recognize that we are fellow creatures, in a great interconnected web of all that God made - without being reduced to a meaningless and purposeless part of the cosmic flux.

Deciding how this translates into action is a complex matter. The insights which flow from an understanding that we are creatures made by a Creator must be applied to the specifics of our life in the increasingly complex human world which we have made through our growing knowledge of the complexity of creation. But Christians ask for such wise action whenever they ask, in the Lord's prayer to the Creator: "Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven." That the will of God does not include oil-spills, overflowing landfills, declining species diversity, I have no doubt.

God's intention for his creation is better stated in the invitation of Psalm 148 - which is addressed to the whole creation:

> Praise the Lord from the heavens, praise him in the heights above.
> Praise him, sun and moon, praise him all you shining stars.
> Praise him you highest heavens,

> And you waters above the skies.
> Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded, and they were created.
>
> Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea-creatures and all ocean depths, lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding, you mountains and all hills, fruit-trees and all cedars, wild animals and all cattle, small creatures and flying birds, kings of the earth and all nations, you princes and all rulers on earth, young men and maidens, old men and children,
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> Let them praise the name of the Lord.

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