

Glory to God in the Highest, and Peace to God's People *and* Earth

Tobias Winright, Ph.D., Saint Louis University

Conference on Sustainability and Catholic Higher Education

University of Notre Dame

October 9, 2009

“And to the man [*adam*] the LORD said, “...cursed is the ground because of you...” (Genesis 3:17). This may be the first recognition of anthropogenic effects on God's creation. Not only did human sinfulness alienate humans from themselves, from the opposite sex, from their siblings and other people; human sinfulness alienated us from the rest of creation. According to British theologian Michael Northcott: “The story of anthropogenic climate change is also about remembering. The quantity of carbon now in the oceans and atmosphere is a physical footprint, a living memorial, to the industrial revolution and its many victims. These victims include the peoples and other creatures who lived and live in or on the terrestrial and subterranean forests which are being burned to sustain the fossil-fuelled era. They include car accident victims, the victims of fossil-fuelled aerial bombers, and the victims of the fossil-fuelled trains and ovens used in the Holocaust. They include those enslaved in fossil-fuelled industrial factories, first in Victorian England and now across many parts of the Southern hemisphere, where lives were and are foreshortened by industrial pollution and human dignity is degraded in servitude of machines. They include destroyed agrarian communities, lost topsoil, extinct species, wrecked ecosystems. They include flood and drought victims, and those who die, and will die, trying to escape from climate-stressed continents and inundated islands” (Northcott, 268). As a Catholic moral theologian whose teaching and research focuses primarily on issues of war and peace, I find this use of the word “victim” both for humans and for other things (living and nonliving) to be particularly troubling and provocative. Human violent conflict and the current ecological crisis are related problems.

Indeed, destruction of the environment has even been an intentional tactic of war. The use of Agent Orange and Napalm to destroy vegetation to expose enemy targets by the U.S. military during the Vietnam War readily comes to mind as an example. There is also Iraq's burning of the Kuwaiti oil fields at the end of the Persian Gulf War of 1991. Harm to the environment also happens as a side effect, a type of “collateral damage,” of war. Consider, for instance, the U.S.'s use of depleted uranium in munitions, which leave radioactive traces long after the shooting stops, in recent conflicts in Kosovo and Iraq. Of course, if nuclear weapons were ever to be used again, the consequences would be disastrous for humans as well as for the environment. Moreover, Thomas F. Homer has written about “Environmental Changes as Cause of Acute Conflict,” such as competition for sea lanes and resources as the ice melts in polar regions; fighting over water in drier climates of the planet; and turmoil over how to address refugees fleeing from flooded or contaminated areas.

A fundamental link between the attitudes that lead to both war and environmental destruction was observed by Pope John Paul II in his 1990 World Day of Peace Message, “The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility,” also referred to as “Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation” (especially at the very beginning in #1 and later in #12; he also noted this in his earlier social encyclicals *Sollicitudo rei socialis* and *Centesimus Annus*). For his part, in the recent encyclical, *Caritas in veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI emphasizes, “*The way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa*” (#51, emphasis his). Both war and environmental destruction involve instrumentalizing something or someone that

actually has intrinsic or inherent value. Merely using others—humans, non-human life, and nonliving nature—for our benefit is part and parcel of when we put ourselves in place of God, which is, in other words, the sin of idolatry. War and environmental destruction are, in short, a moral, theological problem.

If this is the case, then moral, theological responses are needed to adequately address these related issues. That this conference on “Sustainability and the Catholic University” scheduled this panel in the morning of its first day of gathering, and that this session has been titled “Theologies of Sustainability,” I suspect, is no accident. As John Paul II put it in his World Day of Peace Message, “Clearly, an adequate solution cannot be found merely in a better management or a more rational use of the earth’s resources, as important as these may be. Rather, we must go to the source of the problem and face in its entirety that profound moral crisis of which the destruction of the environment is only one troubling aspect” (#5). In other words, sustainability is a moral norm or principle which, especially as it pertains to the Catholic university, ought to be theologically tethered.

To be sure, sustainability itself is not—and need not be—a theological word or concept. Indeed, the word is ubiquitous these days. As British theologian Ben Quash puts it, “The contemporary concern with finding a Holy Grail called ‘sustainability’ dominates the discussions of environmentalists and government planners...” (308). It has just begun to gain more traction over the last decade or so in books and texts on environmental theology and ethics by Christian authors. According to Brennan R. Hill, in his *Christian Faith and the Environment: Making Vital Connections* (Orbis, 1998), “Sustainability is the capacity for things, in this case the ecosystems of the earth, to continue on. Earth-keeping assures that social systems and natural systems are properly sustained. This precludes undermining the self-renewing capacity of natural systems and demanding unreasonable yields of resources. Proper care and management of all human and natural resources is essential” (178-9). That’s all that Hill devotes to sustainability, however, in the entire book. More recent books, such as James Martin-Schramm and Robert Stivers’ *Christian Environmental Ethics: A Case Method Approach* (Orbis, 2003) and Celia Deane-Drummond’s *Eco-Theology* (Saint Mary’s Press, 2008) discuss sustainability in two or three pages each. Still, interestingly, sustainability is not a major focus in standard theological texts on the environment.

Perhaps this principle is implicit, though. After all, when these authors refer to “earth-keeping” or “stewardship” they seem to have in mind—as Brennan did when defining it above—sustainability. And, yes, the Biblical tradition is commonly tapped by theologians, bishops, and the popes when speaking of humankind’s distinctive vocation in the world. The two creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2 are typically cited: “So God created humankind [*adam*] in his image [*selem*, or icon/statue], in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue [*kabash*] it; and have dominion [*radah*] over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’” (Gen. 1:26-31); and “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it [*abad*] and keep it [*shamar*]” (Gen. 2:15). While much ink has been spilt over what these Hebrew words really meant, most environmental theologians emphasize that humans are called to exercise care for creation, not domination but dominion as just care. As a former law enforcement officer, I prefer to translate “to till it and keep it” as “to serve and protect.” The Irish police, or *garda*, perhaps get at it better with their emphasis on guardianship. To be sure, Jesus’ revelation to us of how God has dominion—as

kenotic self-emptying and as loving, healing, reconciling service—should also warn us against any temptation instead to dominate.

Some theologians recently have expressed concern, however, about sustainability if it theologically unmoored. Indeed, they worry that it can ironically reinforce attitudes and assumptions that are usually lurking behind the old domination model. Quash, for example, writes, “The fact remains, though, that this model [i.e., sustainability] is still a management model, and so still implicitly reinstatiates a dualism between human beings and the natural world which it is their principal task to control” (308). This management model, which Quash attributes to Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinking, dualistically distinguishes humans from nature. It reinforces an anthropocentrism whereby humankind possesses “manipulative hegemony” over the objectified and instrumentalized natural world (308-309). A “strong” form of this management model is what Quash refers to as the Promethean attitude, which “holds that human ingenuity alone can solve all the difficulties we face now and will face in the future,” as long as we have “the relevant information” at our “disposal to make appropriate plans on behalf of the environment...” (314). Similar concerns about such a management model of sustainability have been shared by other theologians, including the aforementioned Northcott, D. Stephen Long and John Milbank. To bring us back to my earlier point drawing from John Paul II and Benedict XVI about the attitudinal link behind war and environmental destruction, Quash suggests that the Promethean manager of sustainability still “regards any natural thing as available for his unrestricted use (as orientated to *him* rather than to some *telos* of its own, or of God’s)” (314).

To turn a line from a doxological prayer on its head (“world without end, amen, amen”), the world—and indeed all creation—has an end, not a *terminus* but a *telos*, a purpose in God’s eyes. I don’t mean this in an instrumental sense. Rather, everyone and everything has God-given and inherent value. Benedict warns against “[r]educing nature merely to a collection of contingent data [that] ends up doing violence to the environment and even encouraging activity that fails to respect human nature itself” (#48). We humans matter to God, but matter matters to God also.

In addition to a proper understanding of the Genesis creation narratives on dominion, there are other scriptural and theological supports for a model of sustainability that avoids such these “isms” of dualism, anthropocentrism, instrumentalism, and reductionism. The intrinsic goodness of creation (“And God saw that it was good and blessed everything”) is repeated several times in the first chapter of Genesis. That humans are a relational part of creation is conveyed in the wordplay of *adam* and *adamah* in Genesis 2. Of course, human sinfulness disrupted all of this, as mentioned earlier, introducing alienation and conflict between humans and God, humans and their very selves, humans and other humans, and humans and the rest of creation. But this wasn’t the last word. Instead, what we find is that the end or *telos* or purpose that God has in mind for everyone and everything is reconciliation, solidarity, harmony, restoration, re-creation, renewal—all of which are encapsulated in the Hebrew Biblical word *shalom*, or peace.

Speaking on behalf of God, the eighth-century prophet Hosea wrote, “I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things on the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety” (Hosea 2:18). Biblical scholars note that this echoes the covenant God made with all creation after the flood: “Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ‘As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you..., that never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.’ God said,

“This is a sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth” (9:8-13). The bow was a weapon of war, but now it was set down. In contrast to the consequences that followed from the sin of Adam, no longer was the earth to be cursed because of humankind: “I will never again curse the ground [*adamah*] because of humankind [*adam*]...; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done” (Gen 8:21). We Christians believe that Jesus Christ, as the author Colossians put it, reconciles all things, and that creation, as St. Paul poetically notes in his letter to the Romans, “has been groaning in labor pains until now” and waited “with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God” who have the first fruits of the Spirit of redemption and thus a peaceable vocation in this world. As the psalter said, “When you send forth your spirit...you renew the face of the earth” (Psalm 104:30). We humans have a co-recreative role to play in this story.

Ending with where I began on the ethics of war and peace, both pacifists and just war Christians are supposed to seek to restore a just peace, which is referred to as the principle of right intent and is akin to what the Hebrew Scriptures call *shalom*. We know the end (or *telos*) of the story. “Peace to God’s people *and* earth,” I think, is a proper theological starting point for thinking about sustainability and the Catholic university. Such an approach to sustainability, to be sure, will often resemble what happens at non-Catholic, even secular universities—and I’m not altogether sure what it will look like in practice. But I also suspect it might offer something distinctive and helpful to the conversation. It will be characterized by humility, gratitude, service, and hope—even as it entails responsibilities of conserving, caring, and nurturing creation.