

# The earth as a “garden” for all creatures:

## Lynn White forty years on

In 1967, a brief but influential article appeared in the magazine, *Science*. It was entitled "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis". Its author was Lynn White, Jr.<sup>1</sup> The essay proved to be a watershed in the thought regarding our attitude to the broader natural and human environments of our earthly home.

What is particularly significant about White's article was his argument to the effect that, in order to successfully address the emerging environmental crises, humans must first examine and critique their attitudes toward nature in ways that are rooted in their religious beliefs. He wrote that "What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny -- that is, by religion."<sup>2</sup>

White's analysis claimed not only that the human capacity to wreak damage and destruction upon the environment has grown out of the Western technological and scientific advances made since the emergence of modern science in the sixteenth century. He also claimed that these advances occurred in a Mediaeval social context that was informed by the Judeo-Christian tradition in its Western form, both Catholic and Protestant. He asserted that this Western Christianity is "the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen",<sup>3</sup> and that it was this anthropocentrism that has given humans permission to exploit nature in a way that is indifferent to its integrity. White concluded by saying that

*No new set of basic values has been accepted in our society to displace those of Christianity. Hence we shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no other reason for existence save to serve man.<sup>4</sup>*

White's assertion is that this arrogance towards nature on the part of the Western Christian tradition means that this tradition "bears a huge burden of guilt" for the contemporary environmental crisis.<sup>5</sup>

Needless to say, White's thesis touched off a firestorm of controversy and, in many ways this controversy still continues, as the practical realities of global warming and other issues are increasingly thrust at us.

### White's alternative

White is no anti-Christian. Indeed he identifies himself as "a churchman".<sup>6</sup> This has some relevance because the last part of his 1967 paper comprises a proposal for an alternative Christian view that finds its roots in the views and outlook of Francis of Assisi. In so doing White claims that Francis is "the greatest spiritual revolutionary in history".<sup>7</sup> The latter's views are summed up follows:

*Francis held neither to transmigration of souls nor to pantheism. His view of nature and man rested on a unique sort of pan-psychism of all things animate and inanimate, designed for the glorification of their transcendent Creator who, in the ultimate gesture of cosmic humility, assumed flesh, lay helpless in a manger, and hung on a scaffold.<sup>8</sup>*

According to White, the alternative of Francis was "to substitute the idea of the equality of all creatures, including man, for the idea of man's limitless rule of creation".<sup>9</sup> It is this view that he places before us as the way to go.

However, as he does not elaborate what might be involved with the idea of "an equality of creatures" it is very difficult to properly assess what he might have meant by it.

### An “eager beaver” state environmental authority

We might illustrate the seriousness of this issue with reference to a specific example that illustrates the problem of the way in which humans can exercise power over other creatures.

The Department of Environmental Quality, in one of the states of the USA, issued a letter to a farmer, drawing attention to an unauthorised activity entailing the construction and maintenance of two wood debris dams across the outlet stream of a small lake on his land.<sup>10</sup>

A recent rain event had caused the dams to fail, causing debris and flooding at downstream locations. The Department determined that this activity was in violation of part of the Natural Resource and Environmental Protection Act. It therefore drew the attention of the landowner to this state of affairs ordering him “to cease and desist from all such activities at this location”, and to restore the stream to a free-flow condition by removing all wood and brush forming the dams from the stream channel, citing a date by which this work had to be done. Failure to comply would result in legal proceedings against the said landowner.

In a really quite hilarious letter the owner did admit to being the legal landowner. However he denied that he was the contractor engaged in the dam construction. In fact, he claimed that this construction was carried out by a “firm of beavers” who did the job without his authorisation, payment or supervision.

In spite of their failure to comply with the statutory provisions of the Resource and Environmental Protection Act, the landowner claimed that the beavers would be highly offended if they knew that the state authority called their skilful use of natures building materials “debris”. Moreover he challenged the Department of Environmental Quality to attempt to emulate their dam project, stating that he could safely state that there is no way they could ever match the skills, ingenuity, and persistence of the beavers.

Quite clearly the State Environmental agency had no means of directing its instructions to the beavers. Moreover, as the beavers were not livestock “owned” by the landowner, the latter could not be held accountable for the problems resulting from the dam failure of the beaver’s construction.

Although somewhat absurd, one way of humans interpreting the idea of “an equality of all creatures” would be to assume that they were very much like us, and that they should also both be able to understand and carry out the instructions of the State Environmental Agency. On this basis, because the beavers did not take the trouble to understand and carry out these instructions, the State Environmental Agency might decide to deal with their problem by exterminating the beavers and their dams.

Resorting to this kind of measure would amount to a form of “capital punishment” for the beavers. More properly it would certainly illustrate Lynn White’s view concerning “the limitless rule of creation supposedly introduced by the Christian view of humans, made in God’s Image, ruling the earth”<sup>11</sup>.

On the other hand, the idea of “an equality of all creatures, including man” could lead to the view that humans should leave all creatures untouched, deliberately starving ourselves to death or leaving ourselves open to the ways in which mosquitoes and rats carry diseases and inflict the ravages of plagues and malaria. Such a view would lead to the reversal of much the greater part of the achievements of medical science in the conquest of human diseases. The microbes and bacteria causing them are also living creatures. The dictum of a strict and straightforward interpretation of the idea of an “equality of all creatures including man” might be taken to have these sorts of implications.

Furthermore our experience of the created world, prior to any distinctive human influence on it, does *not* demonstrate any sensible idea of “an equality of all creatures”. The lion does not ordinarily lie with the lamb. The biological need for food instinctively drives the way in which animals and plants behave. The idea of the equality of all creatures under the spin of a Darwinian struggle for existence led to various forms of social Darwinism with devastating results in the forms of capitalism, communism and Nazism. Hence, the example of the beavers and the edicts of the Government Environmental Authority expose a serious problem concerning the proper relationship of humans to the wider creation. However, it is not one that can readily be resolved in terms of a simplistic alternative between “an equality of all creatures including man” and “a limitless exercise of power by humans who consider themselves rulers of the earth in an absolute sense”. (ENDNOTE White, *op cit*, as published in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature Environment, op cit*, 201

There is a more realistic alternative that flows from the writings of the Bible. The proper exercise of human power should, in its allowance for human needs, treat other creatures with integrity. In the “case” of *the beavers v Government Environmental Authority* cited above, this would imply that the human interests of the landowner as well as the broader earthly environmental interests of the Government Environmental Authority should be advanced in a way that respected, allowed for and protected the beavers and their habitat. This should mean that the farming and other human interests should be advanced in a way that reflects both the beaver and the more specific human concerns.

### A garden and three blind alleys

Since 1967 Lynn White’s *Science* article has seen a wealth of literature of religious environmental ethics and theology (ecotheology). It has mushroomed to an incredible degree.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, more than anything else, this has enabled us to realise that all serious discussions of ecological challenges are grounded in some religious and philosophical worldview. Such issues as global warming, climate change, the ozone layer, pollution of all sorts press in upon us on all sides. However, in these debates we need to recognise that worldview issues are involved, and that there needs to be a dialogue and understanding between them, in spite of serious disagreement.

Equally, however, this dialogue needs to be one that is informed by the kinds of facts that have been discussed in the section above. In particular there needs to be contributions made from the natural and social sciences, including, but not limited to, conservation and evolutionary biology, sociology, economics, ecology, physics, anthropology, and political science.

The focus of this paper is upon the religious roots of the worldview issues involved. In this respect I shall claim that the literature of the Bible view *does* give us a normative standpoint and that this standpoint can be distorted by us humans in three basic ways, possibly in some combination. In this respect, I claim that Lynn White’s analysis gets nowhere near giving us an adequate “worldview map” by which to assess either the historical development of our situation, or the future options before us.

In an endeavour to elucidate what I consider to be this Biblical view, I prefer to begin with a consideration of the second chapter of Genesis.(ENDNOTE I am very grateful for the broader Biblical input given to me by my friend Stuert Henderson on the matters pertaining to the three key Hebrew words of Genesis 3:15, as discussed below). The main reason for this is that the influence of the Lynn White thesis concerning the meaning of “human dominion” has made it difficult for us moderns to come to the first chapter of Genesis in a way that enables us to assess its proper meaning in a fair and unbiased manner. Hence I shall take my starting point from the second chapter, where in verse 15 we read:

*God took the human person and put him in the garden (Heb:gan) to cultivate (Heb:’abad) and care for (Heb:shamar) it. (Gen 2:15)*

At least three important points arise from the context of this verse. The first concerns the basic character of a garden; the second concerns the fact that the Edenic garden did not comprise the whole earth envisaged by the second chapter of Genesis. The third concerns the point of the humans being cast out and prevented from re-entering the garden at Eden.

First, let us consider the basic character of a garden. The root meaning of the Hebrew word ‘*abad*’ is “to serve”. However, the meaning carries with it a formative and active component that is partly captured by the older English translation “till”. A good contemporary English word to translate the meaning is “cultivate”. Hence, if humans *don’t* work and cultivate the earth and place the plants in the appropriate places, then we may end up with a swamp, a grassy clearing in a forest, a patch of heather or some other kind of setting for the growth of plants that are independent of human intervention. However, we won’t end up with a garden – at least not as we generally understand it.

The root of the Hebrew word *shamar* is to conserve, to keep or to care for. (Refer: *shamar* is widely used in the Old Testament to describe *the keeping* of the covenant). Hence, when we humans engage in an activity with plants in the earth that does *not* look after the welfare of their progeny, we will not have a garden. If certain fragile plants are not protected from the elements we will lose the garden. If we allow a patch of earth that had just been planted is allowed to grow

without adequate care and attention, so that the plants are allowed to become overgrown by weeds, then we will not have a garden. Equally, if we remove the plants or leave them to grow wild in the midst of a concrete jungle or a garbage dump then we will also fail to have a garden.

A garden, then, requires both the human cultivation of the soil and plants of the earth ('*abad*) as well as the human caring for, conserving (*shamar*) of the creaturely integrity and general well-being of these plants as well as the soil in which they grow.

I want to suggest that this twofold emphasis of *the human cultivation of*, together with *the caring or conserving the integrity of* the creatures of our earthly home counts as the Biblical path upon which we humans are called to walk (and I deliberately say "walk" rather than "run", "motor" or 'fly').

Consider now the second point. The meaning of the Hebrew word *gan*, deriving from the root *gnn*, is twofold: to protect and to enclose. The latter also carries the connotation of "putting a boundary around". The story in Genesis 2 does not picture the garden at Eden as the whole earth. In addition, general modern day parlance envisages the human habitat associated with a garden as a location with a boundary within which it is protected. The idea of a garden also usually entails a realm in which the human formative activity of '*abad*' predominates over the conserving activity of *shamar*. As such there is a boundary around this habitat. There are other kinds of habitats that need to find their place within the broader context of a rich and variegated creation. In this sense the protective force of *shamar* can be said to have a predominance over '*abad*' yielding habitats that have protective boundaries around them. Today such boundaries may be said to be introduced by humans, so as "to *shamar*", or conserve and protect these creaturely habitats from an overzealous '*abad*' or human cultivating activity.

At one time it might have been possible to see the distinction of a garden and the habitats of non-human creatures as a geographical or spatial one. In this situation the natural earthscape was more or less clearly marked, with human habitation functioning mainly within spatially defined pockets that left vast tracts of natural habitat virtually untouched. However, the manner in which the human development of the world now threatens the well-being of non-human habitats everywhere, any such spatial distinction without direct human intervention, is problematic.

We need to rethink the meaning of a human garden in relation to the rest of creation. My proposal is in that it should be in the terms of an idea of the earth as "a garden for all creatures". This has basically two implications for the way we humans interact with our overall earthly environment. First we should take care *not* to extend human habitation, cultivation and development to the whole of the earth. Second we should remember that all of our cultivating activity should be accompanied by one that conserves and protects the non-human habitats that we influence. Our ordinary use of the word "garden" implies that the cultivating of and caring for the patch of earth we call a garden takes place within the certain spatial boundaries. Without throwing away this notion as that which qualifies the domain in which we humans now live, we need to add to it a dimension that focuses primarily upon "the conservation or caring for" aspect of our mandate. To this end we can think of it as entailing the way in which we deliberately set aside certain regions so that the habitats of non-human creatures are protected within it.

Thus, a national park does *not* have the objective of becoming a garden in the usual sense. However, the two elements that I have identified as crucial to "gardening" are nonetheless involved. In this case human cultivation is kept to the very minimum necessary for the caring of the creaturely habitat so that it is left "unspoilt" by human intervention.

A city is at the opposite end of this spectrum. It entails the cultivating activity of the human hand predominating to the extent that the habitats of rivers, trees, and animals are modified to a huge degree. Normatively, this modification should give due consideration to the well-being of the rivers and other creatures within the domain of the city – so that the integrity of these creatures is maintained in the way they are affected by the accomplishment of more specifically human ends. If this fails then the very "garden-like" identity of the city is threatened.

Agriculture and horticulture entail the cultivation of animals and plants toward the production of food, clothing, and shelter for human needs. The manner in which this is done needs to respect the integrity of the creaturely well-being of the plants and animals involved. Hens, pigs, sheep, and cattle, for example, are not just economic objects. Neither are they like cars and other manufactured goods designed for human use. They have they have their own creaturely integrity

that should be respected and cared for in the course of the way in which they are treated in the process of human food production and clothing production.

The forced human exit from the garden at Eden is the third feature arising from the story in the second and third chapters of Genesis. The symbolism of the Garden of Eden is one in which the creaturely activity of cultivating and caring for creation by humans takes place in the full presence of God that is identified by the word *shalom* in Hebrew. Human covenant-breaking brings this *shalom* to a halt. The relationship between God and the creation as it is ruled by humans is severely fractured. Humans are prevented from eating the tree of life. This will only be possible in the eschatological fullness of time when the full Edenic reality of *shalom* is restored in the new heavens and the new earth. (see Rev 22:1-5). The primary relevance of this, for our purposes, is that the final and complete fulfilment of our human calling to exercise a proper stewardly dominion of the earth is associated with the coming of the new heavens and the new earth. Nonetheless, this calling remains as a norm that should guide our action during the present course of history.

This two-fold emphasis of cultivating and caring for/conserving a garden on the part of human beings lends a somewhat different orientation to the idea of dominion that we have been brought up to read *into* the human calling introduced in the opening chapter of Genesis.

Humans do have dominion over the earth. However, the earth is not something that we humans own. A steward is someone who is given real power to rule. However, the terms of reference of the legitimate exercise of that rule are given by a higher authority owning the property, and to whom the steward is accountable. Human dominion entails ruling the earth. However, the exercise of that power is as steward over something owned by someone else. In this case the steward, in their calling to rule or have dominion over the earth, has the calling to cultivate ('*abad*) and to protect/care for (*shamar*) the earth as "a garden for all creatures", and is held accountable to the Owner for what and how it is carried out. (Mt 21:33-41)

### **Human "caring for" presumes human "cultivation"**

The evidence is that humans are late-comers to the scene of God's creation. During that time, the creation got along fine without humans needing to care for it. Hence the idea that humankind was created by God to take care of a world that was somehow an unkempt wilderness from the beginning, is *not* what is involved with our calling to cultivate and care for the earth as a garden. Rather, our calling to care for the earth is intimately linked to the idea of our human calling to unfold the God-given potential of creation. However, if this latter activity is *not* accompanied by a simultaneous preservation, serving and enhancement of the integrity of the vast variety of the creatures of the earth, both animate and inanimate, then serious problems for the well-being of all creaturely existence, humans included, result.

Let me put it another way. The human calling to rule the earth is one that entails a calling to develop it a way that allows for a "garden" comprising a wide range of habitats. In our contemporary context, one such habitat is a national park and other wilderness areas, in which the '*abad* component functions so as *shamar* or protect such a habitat from human intervention. Another type of habitat is that of a city or town, in which human civilisation and its industrialisation predominates. The innovative '*abad* or cultivating activity functions very highly in such a habitat. However, if the *shamar* component with respect to the non-human creatures in such a habitat is neglected then such cities or towns become unsuitable places for both non-human as well as human creatures to live in. A rural farming region counts as a third type of habitat in which the relationship between '*abad* and *shamar* may be considered. The non-human creatures in such habitats are mainly animals and plants that have been specially bred to serve the human needs of food and clothing. As such the horticulture or agriculture involves a habitat that should treat them with integrity. As exemplified by battery hens, this is not the case with many modern farm practices. The rural farm habitat has to accommodate three classes of creatures – first the farm animals such as cows and hens, second the "wild" animals and birds – such as the beavers, rats and snakes, and the third the human beings. Again it is the case that a proper interplay between '*abad* innovative cultivation together with the preservative caring for of *shamar* is required.

The whole earthly environment is made up of a wide variety of such habitats. Each should be characterised by the way in which the human activity of developing the God-given potential of

creation, in its cultivation, simultaneously cares for and enhances its creaturely integrity. My proposal is that together these habitats comprise “a garden” for all creatures.

In this light our human relationship to the rest of creation is one in which we, like the stones, the soil, the trees, the flowers, and the potatoes, as well as the cats , the lions and the chimpanzees are all creatures within a cosmos that is the creation of God. One of the unique features of being human is that we are called to both unfold the potential of this creation and to simultaneously care for its integrity and well-being as a total creaturely environment.

God is the ruler of all creation. He has created humankind with the calling to unfold and care for his earth as stewards who are responsible to him for the way we carry out our tasks in this creation. As we all know only too well, we humans have fouled up badly. God, however, has not abandoned his world. He has redeemed it in a way that is focussed upon the person of Jesus, messiah.

### **The eschatological meaning of human dominion**

This is summed up in the words of the second chapter of the book of Hebrews. After citing the words of Psalm 8 that focus upon the human ruling of the earth, the writer goes on to say that:

*In subjecting everything to (mere) humankind, God left nothing unsubjected to him.*

*However, at present we do not see everything subjected to him – at least not yet.*

*But we do see Jesus- who was made for a little while lower than the angels –*

*crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, by God's grace for all humanity. (Heb 2:8-9)*

Now these words were written sometime in the first century AD. I do not think that their author envisaged that humankind, by the twentieth century, would reach a point of unfolding the potential of creation in a way that human dominion would threaten the overall environmental health of the planet. In reality, twenty-first century humans are no nearer to having realised our dominion over the earth than first century humans. The issues are just different. Hence, this verse, in tandem with the significance of humans being removed from the Edenic garden, expresses the eschatological hope in which a resurrected and transformed human race will fulfil its calling in a renewed heavens and a renewed earth.

In the meantime our task is to rule that part of the “garden” that God has entrusted to our care. Our rule is to be that of faithful stewards over those areas and corners of the vineyard that God has entrusted to us by force of circumstance. As Jesus himself said:

*Blessed is that servant whom the master will find looking after his household. Truly he will be set over all his possessions. (Mt 24:45-47)*

It is not necessary that those exercising the creaturely calling of the rule over the earth, in a way that is deserving of the term *stewardship*, be overtly Christian. In this respect we can point to at least two organisations that, whether or not the individuals involved fully share the Biblical roots of the idea of stewardship, nonetheless seek to act out something of the kinds of principles that exemplify it. These examples, as cited by Jared Diamond in his book *Collapse*<sup>13</sup> are the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC).

The FSC is an international non profit organization based in Germany, with a mission statement “to promote environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world’s forests”. People interested in the sustainable consumption of timber, lumber, paper or other forest products can seek to acquire FSC certified products. Through a consultative process, FSC develops standards and policies for sustainable forest management, and accredits certification for member bodies to use their logo. In *Collapse* Jared Diamond praises FSC as a collaboration of environmentalists and business for a sustainable economy. MSC is a similar organization covering sustainable fishery. However, so far it has attracted less commercial and consumer support.<sup>14</sup>

### **Three blind alleys**

I now want to talk about three blind alleys that can cloud our vision regarding our contemporary calling with regard to our stewardship of the earth. I will refer to these by means of their religious roots as Gnosticism, Secularism, and Pantheism. However, the focus will be upon the ways in which the worldviews shaped by these roots distort the wholeness of the vision of our human

calling in relation to the wider cosmos as briefly outlined above. In the attempt to make this clear, I shall invoke the imagery and plotline of Tolkien's epic story *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>15</sup>

The basic plotline of Tolkien's epic drama in Middle Earth entails the contest between the reign of good and evil. There is a threat to the further extension of the realm over which evil reigns. In this respect a major theme of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is the simultaneous recovery of the righteous rule of Middle Earth by human beings with the recovery of the health of the broader health of its creaturely environment.

Transferring the imagery of Middle Earth to our real earth would suggest that Tolkien's vision implies that the proper human rule of the earth is inextricably bound to the dual emphasis of its cultivation and conservation that is elaborated from the second chapter of Genesis discussed above.

Part Two of the epic of *The Lord of the Rings* sees the defeat of Isengard with the help of the Ents. Whilst it is never entirely absent elsewhere, the war engaged by the Ents against the power of Saruman at Isengard probably gives the clearest example of the need to battle the threat to the broader health of our earthly environment in the whole work.

Part Three sees the return of the king. Humanity headed by Aragorn, is restored to the rule of Middle Earth. With the destruction of the ring in the depths of Mount Doom, humankind is restored to the proper rule over Middle Earth. Furthermore the exercise of this rule is not a major threat to the wellbeing of the non-human creatures under their care.

If we take Middle Earth as a mythological parallel to our actual earth, then I claim that the normative biblical calling of humankind over the earth – summarised as a “garden for all creatures” – is central to the overall plotline of *The Lord of the Rings*. It may be said to be the simultaneous realisation of a calling to unfold the potential of creation whilst conserving/ caring for the creaturely integrity of all its inhabitants.

In accord with the analysis of Lynn White's seminal paper, the ecological issue is, at root, a *religious* issue. In this respect I claim that there are three basic blind alleys that we humans can try to follow in our responsibility of exercising our human calling in the earth.

From a Biblical point of view these blind alleys are rooted in religious idolatry: they entail the functioning of a god-substitute in the unfolding of human life. My claim is that these primary false paths are Gnosticism/dualism, secularism and pantheism. This does not mean that we confessing Christians follow paths that are not drawn substantially from one or more of these paths. Quite the opposite is the case. In this respect I will seek to illustrate ways in which various groups of Christian people continue to advocate a “gospel” that draws a great deal from one or other of these blind alleys.

### Gnosticism/dualism

The basic idea of the Gnostic worldview<sup>16</sup> influenced by Orphism and Pythagoreanism, is that the earth is a very nasty and dirty place, “created” that way by an inferior god or demiurge, which/who is responsible for the mess. There is, however, a higher more spiritual source of being that has no control over the lesser “god” or demiurge.

Humans are deemed to be born of the earth, but have been given a spark of this higher spiritual divinity. This spark, for the greater part, lies dormant, with most people sleep-walking their way through life. In a spiritual awakening, the dormant spark of spirit can come alive and commence a path toward its heavenly destiny, one that eventually leaves this evil and pointless earthly existence behind.

This form of dualism – which has played a significant role in Hindu/Buddhist as well as early Christian thought - sees little or no meaning or value in the course of life in the earthly part of the cosmos. The latter is intrinsically evil and cannot be made good. However, whilst more orthodox Christianity has resisted this radical assessment of our present human existence on the earth, it has been plagued with forms of dualism that effectively separate the spiritual from the social and natural environmental calling to conserve and cultivate the earth in the manner discussed earlier. Redemption thereby tends to have a Gnostic quality.<sup>17</sup>

Visiting the hall of a church on one occasion, I noticed a statement on a blackboard that was used for teaching purposes. It entailed the words of John 3.16, with the words “the people of” inserted between “God so loved” and “the world”.

*the people of*  
For God so Loved ^ the World, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

The teaching emphasis, of course, was upon an overt emphasis upon God's love for individual human beings in a way that is effectively divorced from their creaturely calling of the unfolding of the potential of creation whilst at the same time caring for the integrity of its creatures.

Furthermore, although it was not overtly mentioned in this case, the eternal life that God has given us through his Son is that of, upon death, a departure to heaven aligned in some way with an eternal eschatological heavenly destiny.

This kind of worldview does not need to be spelt as clearly as it was in this instance. It functions in a large number of communities that call themselves Christian. The over-emphasis upon the individual human relationship to God is usually isolated from the human creaturely calling to cultivate and care for the earth (including its human dimensions). It also tends to be coupled with an eschatological destiny in heaven that has little interest in or hope for the future of the earth or creation generally.

My claim is that this kind of exercise, in its effort to try to bring home the love of God to individual people in the cause of their redemption, capitulates to the blind alley of Gnosticism with regard to our human calling to unfold the potential of creation in a way that cares for the integrity of our fellow creatures.

The use of the word "world" (Gr: *kosmos*) in the Gospel of John means, in the first instance, "creation" (Jn 1:10). However, the usage of the term cannot be divorced from a sense of the way in which humankind shapes and orders creation. Thus the "world" *knows* and *hates* the light. (Jn 1:10; 7:7). The knowing and hating involved here is human, and undoubtedly refers to the way humans have misshaped creation so as to produce "darkness". John 3:16 then reads that "God so loved his creation – as distorted by unfaithful human stewardly dominion – that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him may have eternal life". The next verse then affirms that God's purpose in so doing is to save not to *condemn* the world as God's creation under the rule of human stewardship. In these words, the Gospel of John, sometimes recognised as having more of Gnostic quality than the other three canonical gospels, is quite clearly part of strategy to critique Gnosticism. This gospel, at its core, has a very realistic appreciation of both the fallenness of this world as God's creation and its redemption in Jesus, messiah.

Indeed I suggest that if Tolkien were to have written *The Lord of the Rings* in tune with a worldview influenced by dualisms influenced by Gnosticism, then the destiny of the fellowship of the ring would have been to some realm beyond Middle Earth altogether – somewhere called "Middle Heaven" perhaps!

### **Secularism**

Genesis 1:26-31 speaks of humankind being made in God's image and that we have been given a dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air and creeping things that creep over the earth.

Lyn White was quite right in his claim that these verses have been used to justify the view that the sea, the land, the fish, the birds, and the animals have all been given to humankind as their absolute possession. This justifies big game hunting and fishing. It has also been used to justify the human domination of the earth in a way that draws an antithesis between the human cultivation of the world as a mark of civilisation and the supposed intrinsic barbarism of the hunter-gatherer way of life.

Within the history of New Zealand for example, there was a serious proposal made in 1847 to the effect that the British Parliament would introduce legislation to the effect that the *waste lands* – those lands that were *not* cultivated – then under Maori dominion – would be made crown land and thence sold to the settlers. My point here is in the description of the wonderful bushland of New Zealand as *waste land*.<sup>18</sup>

In one way Lynn White was quite correct in his citation that the Biblical idea of humankind being given a dominion over the earth is at the root of the ecological crisis. Secularism proper requires this Christian-Jewish-Muslim idea as a basis from which to launch itself.

Bertrand Russell, in 1918, wrote some very revealing words concerning the religious roots of secularism. After quoting the Mephistophelian account of creation as the performance of a quite heartless and capricious being, he proceeds as follows:

*Such, in outline, but even more purposeless, more devoid of meaning, is the world which science presents for our belief. Amid such a world, if anywhere, our ideals henceforward must find a home. That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism ..... Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.<sup>19</sup>*

The basic idea is that the universe has somehow thrown up a creature that has, for some strange reason, got big ideas about his/her own place in the scheme of things. The first article of secularist faith is the claim that there is no basis in the underlying reality of the greater scheme of things to sustain this. The almost universal human aspiration toward a spiritual reality that is able to give an ultimate sense of meaning and purpose to human existence is vain.

For example, the Mephistophelian account of creation could be conceived in Gnostic terms, with a “religious” solution in favour of the need for a spiritual awakening leading to a heavenly destiny. Secularism denies this. Instead it takes the direction of trying to find the fullness of whatever meaning humans can give to our existence as something that we might give to the context of our present existence. This counts as the second article of secularist faith. However, this second article builds upon the mistaken emphasis upon human domination made in the reading of Genesis 1 introduced in the eighteenth century by people like the English philosopher John Locke.<sup>20</sup>

I suggest that if Tolkien were to have written *The Lord of the Rings* in the vein of a worldview shaped by such secularist religious assumptions then, until recently, Gandalf and the rest of the Fellowship of the Ring would have joined Saruman and become orc-like creatures at Isengard. All of middle-earth would then have become a wasteland and humans would have lost the calling to exercise a righteous rule of Middle Earth.

Now, it is of course true that many secularists would object to this. They would correctly point out that they have tended to be far more concerned about environmental degradation than most Christians. The point is that, just as Lynn White levels his criticism for the environmental crisis against the roots of the Christian worldview, so we must respond by citing its roots in the secularist worldview. Logically, the concern for the environment flowing from secularists grows out of a growing awareness that we won’t be able to get what we need from the broader creaturely environment if we do not treat it with much more care.

In other words, the categorical imperative may have changed, but the only way this imperative can become an ought, entailing a massive failure on the part of humankind, is via the kind of Biblical worldview that has been discussed in the earlier section of this article. In other words, whilst it is true that many secularists might want to join the fellowship of the ring in the quest to try to deal with the environmental crisis and other evil things in the world, this view of things is actually better founded in a Biblical worldview that locates the causes of cosmic evil on a larger canvas, one that truly places human beings as largely responsible for it, calling us all to a genuine repentance.

### Pantheism

Pantheism is a religious view of the world that sees everything as divine. In particular, the natural worlds of plants, animals and inanimate things are all deemed to be sacred – on an equal par with human beings. There are many ways in which the growing anthropocentrism of the Western middle ages, noted by Lynn White in his ‘*The Roots of the Ecological Crisis*’, is in contrast to the kinds of religious pantheism that shaped earlier outlooks.<sup>21</sup>

However, whether or not White realized it, the main worldview culprit is the secularism that I have tried to describe in the previous section. In effect, White conflates secularism with what I have termed the normative Biblical alternative of the earth as “a garden for all creatures”. Supposedly following on from Francis of Assisi, White’s alternative to this secularism is the substitution of the idea of “an equality of all creatures, including man, for the idea of man’s limitless rule of creation”. We could engage in much debate with regard to whether or not Francis was really a pantheist in the theological sense. For the present purposes, however, the main issue is not directly theological. Rather it concerns the way in which humans and other creatures relate to ‘the divine’, with particular reference to the way in which humans engage with non-human creation.

In this respect, if Tolkien had written *The Lord of the Rings* out of a pantheistic worldview then Aragorn would *not* have led the humans of middle-earth into regaining a kingly rule over Middle-Earth. From such a perspective, this kind of the plotline of his epic would have entailed an introduction of the equality of creaturely power rather than a return to a ruling humankind. The rule of the earth by humankind, as made clear by Lynn White following Francis of Assisi, is deemed to be the central problem of existence from a worldview vantage point influenced by pantheism. Hence, under the influence of pantheism, the final resolution of the plotline of *The Lord of the Rings* following the destruction of the ring in the depths of Mount Doom, would certainly *not* have led to “the return of the king”. It would have lead to an equality of all creatures, with no particular powers of cultivating initiative and stewardly “caring for” other creatures sustained by humankind.

I would like to cite an example of an attempt to deal with the first two blind alleys that leads to the third with a reference to the website ecofaith.org,<sup>22</sup> The worldview basic to this Ecofaith ministry entails a theological move that would seek to replace the biblical idea of “humankind made in God’s image” with “*life* made in God’s image”.

This approach draws directly from Lynn White’s analysis. The idea that humans are made in God’s image is taken to imply that is God is *exclusively* like humankind, with the rest of creation being deemed to have been given to humans for their use. The error of this blind alley has already been discussed in the previous two sections.

However, the attempt of ecofaith.org to rectify the ecological errors of the blind alley of secularism by means of an advocacy of the idea that God is the *God of life* is a trip down the blind alley of pantheism. As a study of this website will make clear, it follows on directly from an acceptance of the diagnostic analysis of Lynn White in his 1967 paper.

God is not merely “the God of life”. God is the *God of all creation* – including the stars and the planets. Hence the objection to humans being made in the image of God is not effectively met by the idea that *life is made in the image of God*. It should affirm that the whole of creation is made in the image of God. With this we are definitely on a path toward pantheism. Further-more, to claim that *life is made in the image of God* is to imply that God is not fully personal. This would imply that God does *not* embody such personal attributes as love, mercy, faithfulness, compassion, and justice. We humans *do* have such attributes. Whether animals and plants have them is a very moot point that is pertinent to the issue at stake. Plants, at least, do not exhibit them. We humans certainly do not fulfil the callings entailed with our being endowed with these attributes perfectly. For that very reason we stand guilty before God in the way we exercise our rule of stewardly dominion within creation.

God is the God or Lord of all creation, including atoms, stars, carbon dioxide, grass, trees, beetles, birds, and dinosaurs. However, when the Scriptures speak of humankind as made in God’s image they imply that humankind shares something of the character and power of God that no other creatures (at least on earth) share. We are creatures that share qualities of person-hood with God, albeit that we are small and almost insignificant in stature. Our rule over the earth does not make its non-human creatures our property to do with what we may. The earth remains God’s creation. Our place within it is as creatures having the dominion to fulfil the will of the God. We rule as stewards of his creation. As discussed in the earlier parts of the article, this means that, as part of our loving relationship to God, we are called to help bring creation to its “garden-city” fulfilment in the way we both cultivate it and conserve/care for it.

God is certainly present everywhere in creation. However, God is *not* part of creation. The beauty of the earth and the celestial heavens above us is certainly awe-inspiring. As such it

points to its transcendent Creator. This Creator is everywhere present – immanently within this creation. However, the sunsets and the mountains are not part of God. They, like us, are creatures that, by their created dignity, declare the glory of God. We too, as humans are called to declare the glory of God in the way we realise the normative content of the Word of God as wisdom, justice, faithfulness and agape-love. The concrete realisation of these qualities is in short supply in this sinful world. This earthly world, like Middle Earth, is caught up in a battle between good and evil. The fellowship of the ring should have earthly parallels that seek to engage in the realization of the contents of wisdom, faithfulness and justice. As Christians we know that this is only really possible through the grace of God in the here and now as we journey toward the New Jerusalem.

### Conclusion

God has made the earth in a way that, since the advent of humankind upon it, calls for us to develop and unfold its resources as a generalised garden that, like Noah's ark, has a place for all creatures in there god-given habitat. This generalized "garden" still belongs to God. That part of it which properly qualifies as a garden in the usual sense, requires human cultivation. However, this cultivation should demonstrate the definitive care for all the creatures over which humans have been given "dominion".

As exemplified by the Crusades, Christianity as an historical phenomenon, has made many serious blunders. Over the past four hundred years it would be true to say that the dominant vision of Western Christians has been that of an uneasy and disjoint synthesis between what I have called the Gnostic and the Secular blind Alleys. During the last fifty years, much of it influenced by the publication of Lynn White's 1967 paper, has seen a shift to the third blind alley – that of pantheism.

Each of the blind alleys that I have attempted to describe has a measure of the truth. However, my claim is that we need to pursue a path of exercising the dominion of faithful stewards that is rooted in the calling that I have elaborated from Genesis 2:15.

*God took the human person and put him in the garden(Heb:gan) to cultivate (Heb:‘abad) and care for (Heb:shamar) it. (Gen 2:15)*

**Duncan Roper is ..... ??????**

<sup>1</sup> Lynn White, Jr., "The historical roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* Vol 155, pp. 1203-1207 (10 March 1967): 1203-1207. The article has since been published elsewhere. In particular it has been published as a chapter in the volume *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature Environment*, Roger Gottlieb (ed.) Oxford: Routledge, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2004, pp191-201. The pagination that follows refers to this publication

<sup>2</sup> White, op cit , as published in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature Environment*, Roger Gottlieb (ed.) 196.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid ,197..

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 201.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid ,199

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 199.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 201.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid,, 200.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 201.

<sup>10</sup> This is taken from the text of an actual letter sent to a man named Ryan DeVries by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Quality, State of Pennsylvania. Ryan's response is also authentic, but needs to be seen in the context of the original letter. I am indebted to Rev Peter Stuart for passing this on to me.

<sup>11</sup> White, , op cit , as published in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature Environment*, Roger Gottlieb (ed.) 201.

<sup>12</sup> Witness the volume *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature Environment*, Roger Gottlieb (ed.) Oxford: Routledge, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Jared Diamond, *Collapse* (New York, NY: Viking, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 101-103

<sup>15</sup> The broader background interpretation of Tolkien's work upon which this to some extent depends is illustrated in Fleming Rutledge, *The Battle for Middle Earth*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004); Ralph Wood, *The Gospel According*

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*to Tolkien* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003); M. Dickerson and J. Evans, *Ents, Elves and Eriador: the Environmental Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien*, (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> The best treatment of this that I know of is Stephan A. Hoeller, *Gnosticism: New Light on the Ancient Tradition of Inner Knowing* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> For an example of the manner in which Gnosticism has affected Christian orthodoxy, refer to Philip J. Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). Refer also to N.T.Wright, *Judas and the Gospel of Jesus*, (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, Michigan).

<sup>18</sup> For an account of this episode of New Zealand history refer to Frederika Hackshaw, "Nineteenth Century Notions of Aboriginal Title", *Waitangi: Maori & Pakeha Perspectives of the Treaty of Waitangi*, I.H. Kawharu (ed.) (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1989), 92-120.

<sup>19</sup> Bertrand Russell, *A Free Man's Worship*, reprinted in R. Egner and L. Denonn (eds), *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1961), 66-67.

<sup>20</sup> Refer to John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, a critical edition with an introduction and apparatus criticus, by Peter Laslett, Cambridge University Press, 1970. 159-281

<sup>21</sup> White, *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature Environment*, Roger Gottlieb (ed.), op cit, 196-197.

<sup>22</sup> ecofaith.org [Accessed 6 October 2007].