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# Christian Environmentalism: Cosmos, Community, and Place

John Wood, Janel Curry, Steve Bouma-Prediger, Mark Bjelland, and Susan Bratton

*It is now clear that a sense of place is a human hunger that the urban promise has not met. And a fresh look at the Bible suggests that a sense of place is a primary category of faith.*

– Walter Brueggemann<sup>1</sup>

In July of 2003, nineteen Christian scholars gathered at Calvin College for a three-week intensive seminar entitled, “Christian Environmentalism With/Out Boundaries: Living as Part of God’s Good Earth.” The participants came from academic disciplines that ranged from ecology to history, from geography to communications. Several practitioners were also among the participants. The seminar was organized and led by an interdisciplinary team funded by a Council for Christian Colleges and Universities Networking Grant and Calvin College: John Wood (Biologist, Kings University College); Janel Curry (Geographer, Calvin College); Mark Bjelland (Geographer, Gustavus Adolphus College); Steve Bouma-Prediger (Theologian, Hope College); and Susan Bratton (Ecologist, Baylor University).

The key question addressed by this team and the seminar was: *How can our understanding of self and our moral understanding be deepened to account for our membership in societies that are embedded in particular places, which are, in turn, embedded within ecosystems?* This question reflects the challenge, within academia and the Christian community, of understanding humans as placed simultaneously within societal structures and within nature, in a way that neither negates the uniqueness of humans, created in the image of God, nor denigrates the value of God’s creation. The challenge is the full integration of humans, society, and nature into the vision of *shalom* that God intends—an integration that is crucial for our decisions on how to structure our lives in relation to God’s good Earth.

Our desire in this special issue of *PSCF* is to present some initial thinking from this ongoing discussion. All of these articles attempt to stretch our understanding of ourselves in relation to each other, to the earth, and to God. We begin by recognizing that we are members of societies that are embedded in particular places, which in turn are embedded within biophysical systems. We are earth creatures and place-makers, constructed from the bones of the earth. We are spatial creatures (i.e., *Homo geographicus*) embodied from planetary materials, not just knowing creatures (i.e., *Homo sapiens*). How can our moral understanding be deepened to account for these fundamental relationships? Is the full integration of human society and nature desirable, or even possible? Can the vision of God’s *shalom* be achieved, and if so, what might it look like when actualized on earth?

We start with stretching our theological and philosophical understanding of the meaning of humans being created in the image of God. Bret Stephenson,

## In This Issue

We are privileged to publish this cluster of papers on environmental issues and Christian faith. The manuscripts were edited and developed by a working team of five scholars. All have written in the area of environmental science and represent strengths across the theoretical divide as it is presently exists. Steve Bouma-Prediger and Susan Bratton have training in philosophy and theology; Susan also is an ecologist. John Wood is a biologist specializing in aquatic ecology and conservation. Mark Bjelland and Janel Curry are both geographers with social science and physical science training. Mark Bjelland is an environmental engineer. Three peer reviewers, Hank Bestman, Randy Haluzadelay, and Harry Cook, in addition to the editorial team read and critiqued early drafts of the manuscripts. Harry Cook also did copy editing work on all of the manuscripts.

The guest editorial, written by the editorial team, provides the context for the six major articles that follow. I gratefully acknowledge the contribution of this team and trust our readers will be challenged by their work and effort.

Shalom,  
Roman J. Miller, Editor



The Authors  
Top row:  
Janel Curry, Steve  
Bouma-Prediger, and  
Mark Bjelland  
Bottom row:  
Susan Bratton and  
John Wood

**Mark Bjelland** (Ph.D., University of Minnesota) is assistant professor of geography and environmental studies at Gustavus Adolphus College. Dr. Bjelland has degrees in environmental engineering, Christian studies, and a Ph.D. in geography. He studied with Loren Wilkinson at Regent College. He began his career as a consultant, working on a variety of water and environmental remediation projects in the U.S. and Canada. His current research concerns the intersection of environmental degradation, economic distress, and social injustice.

**Steve Bouma-Prediger** (Ph.D., University of Chicago) is associate professor of religion at Hope College in Holland, Michigan. His publications include *The Greening of Theology: The Ecological Models of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Joseph Sittler, and Jürgen Moltmann* (Scholars Press/Oxford University Press, 1995); *Assessing the Ark: A Christian Perspective on Nonhuman Creatures and the Endangered Species Act* (Crossroads, 1997), co-authored with Virginia Vroblecky; *Evocations of Grace: The Writings of Joseph Sittler on Ecology, Theology, and Ethics* (Eerdmans, 2000), co-edited with Peter Bakken; and *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (Baker Academic, 2001).

**Susan P. Bratton** (Ph.D., ecology, Cornell; Ph.D., arts and humanities, University of Texas) is chair of environmental studies at Baylor University. She is author of two books on Christianity and environmental ethics: *Six Billion and More: Human Population Regulation and Christian Ethics*, and *Christianity Wilderness and Wildlife: The Original Desert Solitaire*. Dr. Bratton has also worked for the U.S. National Park Service as director of a field laboratory. In addition to publishing numerous scientific articles on subjects ranging from fire management in parks to the impacts of wild hogs, she has been writing and teaching in environmental ethics. Her books and articles address such issues as Christian relationship to the land, Christian responses to pollution, and Christian approaches to population issues. She has recently published articles and book chapters on religion and American environmentalism, the ethics of commercial fishing, and Christian ecotheology and the Hebrew Scriptures.

**Janel Curry** (Ph.D., University of Minnesota) is dean for research and scholarship and professor of geography and environmental studies at Calvin College. She has served as chair of the Board of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University and as chair of the Rural Geography Specialty Group of the Association of American Geographers. Dr. Curry has publications in geography journals including the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, *The Professional Geographer*, and *The Geographic Review* on topics related to human-land relations and how world views affect relations with nature. Her book *Community on Land*, is a history of privatization and degradation of the America "commons."

**John R. Wood** (Ph.D., University of California) is professor of biology and director of environmental studies at The King's University College. He is a Fellow in the American Scientific Affiliation and chair of the Global Resources and Environment Commission. Dr. Wood has published scientific and interdisciplinary papers and he writes a monthly newspaper column. Since immigrating to Canada, his research has been in urban ecology and natural areas conservation. He was a co-editor of the *Mandate for Global Stewardship*, produced by the CCCU Global Stewardship Initiative.

in his article, begins by acknowledging that we humans are interrelated with the nonhuman creatures with whom we share our home planet. He starts with the assumption that human personhood cannot be separated from our relationship with the multiplicity of nonhumans with whom we share this common realm of creation. Yet technology, primarily as it is employed in scientific practice, mediates between humans created in the image of God and the nonhuman creation. Stephenson employs Actor-Network Theorists (ANT) such as Bruno Latour and John Law, as well as Trinitarian theologians such as Colin Gunton and Loren Wilkinson, in an effort to open up an interdisciplinary dialogue among theological anthropology, the doctrine of creation, and sociological accounts of the technological practice of science.<sup>2</sup>

## Perichoresis and Place

Stephenson and several other authors in this volume work from the assumption that all entities (human, nonhuman, technical) are what they are only by virtue of their relationships to other entities. This is similar to traditional Christian claims about God, which have recently been emphasized by so-called social Trinitarians, namely, that God is who God is only by virtue of the relationships among the persons of the godhead. God is, in short, a community of Love—a family of interpenetrating perichoretic Love. A relational ontology is backed by a relational theology. In Christian terms, all being is being-with; all existence is co-existence, because the God who makes and sustains all things is a triune community of mutually engendering and indwelling love.

David Koetje tackles the hot topic of biotechnology, grounded in both this relational view of *imago Dei*, and also in a sense of place as a normative guide for negotiating our right relationship with the earth. To improve food security and environmental sustainability, it is imperative that we follow a paradigm for agricultural research and policy-making rooted in the places we seek to sustain. Place encompasses the ecological and cultural contexts of human enterprises. Appropriate technologies can enhance the resilience of places. However, place is ignored in the prevailing paradigm of industrial agriculture, eroding the cultural and

ecological interrelationships upon which agriculture depends. To reverse this trend, he argues that we need to develop place-based agricultural systems attuned to the ecology of local bioregions, to the needs and knowledge of local communities, and to cultural values, precaution, care, and restraint. This new paradigm emerges from a Christian environmental perspective that engages agricultural biotechnology toward the goal of promoting cultural and ecological resilience. Koetje also puts value on the “community” as the place where these interrelationships are evident in the full flourishing.

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Dave Warners and Larry Borst explore this concept of “flourishing” by taking on one of the dominant and most powerful gods of our age—the god of More Stuff. Historically Christians have had difficulty formulating a widely accepted ethic and praxis regarding material wealth. In the Scripture, material wealth is described in terms of both blessing and caution. The consumptive, affluent lifestyles enjoyed by many North American Christians today find strong affirmation in John Schneider’s *The Good of Affluence*.<sup>3</sup> Warners and Borst respond to Schneider’s justification of material affluence by pointing out its narrow focus. They claim that Schneider concentrated on the individual and his or her immediate material context, overlooking God’s more encompassing desire for all of creation to flourish. Like Stephenson and Koetje, they point to the need for a relational understanding of humans and God’s primary desire for human beings to flourish in a diversity of ways. They argue for a position that neither blindly condemns nor uncritically condones material affluence, but rather assesses material affluence based on shalomic living. God’s desire for human beings to flourish is subsumed within (but not replaced by) his desire for all of creation to flourish.

Lorynn Divita’s article examines the complexity of our daily consumer choices related to, literally, the clothes on our back. Focusing on the apparel industry, she notes that our apparel binds us together inextricably with the earth: by allowing us to exist by shielding us from harsh conditions; and through the impact textile and apparel production methods have on the natural environment. In so doing, she sheds needed light on an industry that has been given relatively little attention. Divita offers an ethical

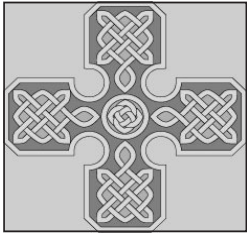
critique from an explicitly Christian perspective. In addition, she points out that our apparel binds us together socially and in powerful metaphorical ways as well. Apparel represents boundaries between us and nature and among humans.

## Boundaries

The scientific enterprise is most often seen as a placeless activity, “the locus classicus of knowledge that is displaced, dislocated, disembedded.”<sup>4</sup> But as Livingstone has shown, the boundary between universal scientific knowledge and particular places is more fluid than we have imagined. Issues of boundaries are essential to developing a fully integrated view of humans, the earth, and God. Boundaries are constitutive of life and making a place necessarily involves choices about boundaries. Biologists sometimes speak of “skin-in” or “skin-out” phenomena, cosmologists model the edge of the space-time continuum, chemists partition matter along boundary layers, and engineers search for appropriate boundary conditions for all manner of processes. In the social sciences, geography is the quintessential boundary making and marking discipline. Feminism was built on recognizing the gender boundary as a primary driving force for ordering society. And other, more metaphorical views on boundaries “abound,” so to speak. Personal items like clothing and houses serve to delimit space. These personal boundaries provide safety and shelter and offer a horizon or starting place for relationships. Postmodern thought is famous for locating and transgressing social and linguistic boundaries. So it would seem that nearly every aspect of human experience involves boundary making in some fashion. Christian understanding of the environment can be improved by careful thinking about boundaries.

David Clements and Wayne Corapi press us to ask an important question about boundaries: What is a weed? In so doing, they push the ever-present (post)modern issue of boundaries to the fore—the boundary between native and non-native species, between humans and nature, between the individual and a species, and among ecosystems. They present a case study from the Hawaiian Islands, which are extremely vulnerable to weed invasions. They ask: Should it matter to us that this “paradise on earth” is not as it was before these introductions? Do the original Hawaiian ecosystems possess greater intrinsic value than the new exotic plant communities? How do we deal with difficult issues of managing animals (e.g., wild pigs) for the good of an ecosystem? Invasive species are finding themselves in an increasingly borderless world, and as stewards of creation, human beings need to work on setting the boundaries. Restoration of the integrity of ecosystems parallels a broader restoration of society and brings glory to God. How we achieve this restoration in a particular place requires deeper thinking on our relation to all the creatures, and the history of that place.





## Guest Editorial

### *Christian Environmentalism: Cosmos, Community, and Place*

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Finally, Dorothy Boorse raises questions about the nature of God’s plan for all creatures, but especially humans, within the context of this fallen world. She does this by addressing the important issue of anti-aging technology and the human quest for immortality. Current biomedical research shows promise for prolonging human life spans. Responses to these possible technologies vary from extreme caution, to exuberance, to a futuristic vision of humanity transforming itself. Boorse points out that the effect on the environment is unknown, but is likely to be an increase in individual consumption of resources by a few as well as greater gaps between the rich and the poor. She rightly identifies the connection between radical longevity and our view of the self, of humans in community, and our place in the natural world. The biblical norm is not technologically engineered longevity, but a faithful (finite) life of gratitude, joy, and shalom in the context of the relationships within which God has placed us.

### Thinking on the Earth

Christian thinking—and environmental thought, in general—needs a deeper understanding of humanity’s relationship with nature as it is lived out in society and in communities—the link between philosophy/theology and the earth. These articles attempted to start with the assumption of the nonreducibility of morality, social structures, and the earth. This intersection has been increasingly identified as key to addressing environmental and social problems alike. Jeremy Rifkin in his book, *The Biotech Century*,<sup>5</sup> states that the biotechnology issue exemplifies the intersection of morality, societal structure, and nature, yet we have no clear framework for their meaningful integration. Social theorist Robert Sack similarly identifies this intersection of morality, social structures, and nature as a crucial area for work. He claims that traditional moral precepts have focused on our relations to other human beings, but that this is an incomplete conception of our responsibilities. Moral concerns inevitably draw nature into the picture, especially because life is lived within the context of a place and its ecological circumstances. Sack’s attempt at building an integrated framework puts the self at the center of concentric circles representing

meaning, nature, and social relations.<sup>6</sup> Frameworks, apart from those that put humanity at the center, remain difficult to conceive, even though a sense of morality is recognized as being central to full integration.

Areas in which there needs to be more theorizing, and on which the interdisciplinary group continues to build are as follows:

- *Develop an integrative model of the relationships among God, humans and societal structure, and the earth* that is more complete and nuanced than we presently have. Such a model must move (a) beyond traditional concepts of human stewardship of creation to embeddedness in social structure and the earth and (b) beyond the human-nature split, evident in the dualisms of nature/culture and nature/history. Humans and their cultural creations are part of nature, and nature is historical.
- *Build on the assumption of the relational nature of human beings.* Many biblical scholars and Christian theologians now understand the “image of God” in relational terms,<sup>7</sup> but we have yet to understand fully how this profoundly relational nature finds expression in not just human relations, but also in the relationship between humans and land.<sup>8</sup>
- *Assume a covenantal perspective.* This perspective is an alternative starting point to the dominant Lockean contract perspective. The covenant is a relation between God and a people, but the parties to the covenant, unlike the parties in the Lockean contract, have a prior relation: the relation between creator and created. The covenant is also not a limited relation based on self-interest, but an unlimited commitment based on relationships of loyalty and trust. A covenantal perspective, with its emphasis on community and social obligations, provides a necessary corrective to the dominant individualism of a Lockean world view.
- *Recognize the interrelationship of all aspects of reality, drawing especially on the insights of modern ecology, in contrast to various forms of reductionism.* This will include the exploration of community conservation/political ecology and its models of culture and nature.<sup>9</sup>

- *Build an alternative model of science in relation to human-nature relations.* Problem solving in this area has traditionally been based on a model of rationality that assumes that more information on a phenomenon automatically leads to answers on what actions to take in the management of the creation. Facts have been treated as speaking for themselves, free of the formative influence of the human community. Thus scientific speech has failed to include sufficient legitimacy to communities and social structure. The universalizing nature of science has abstracted nature, humans, and their interrelationships from our more thickly nuanced, intricately interactive reality.
- *Address the problem of assigning value to nature.* Science understands itself to refrain from addressing value questions; yet it engages value issues by focusing on the measurable aspects of the values people assign to nature. Intrinsic value has no place within this framework. Likewise, economics informs the populace of financial costs of choices, but avoids the question of what is possible and what should be desired.

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Many questions remain unanswered. We are only at the beginning. But a revolution is occurring in Christian thinking on the earth. It is putting an emphasis on particular places, both near and far, and on humans as place-makers. What sets this thinking apart from mere geographic speculation is the theological perspective that underlies it.<sup>10</sup> We have a desire to find a place, a home, a center of being and community. We humans are place makers, place-building creatures. And the act of making place is inherently moral. Only recently have we begun rediscovering the pervasiveness of place and its moral dimensions. Place has the potential to become a new window onto our relationships to each other, and to things that make up the natural world.

This greater understanding of place-making arises out of the growing Trinitarian dialogue that promises to reshape the way we see our relations to God, to the earth, and to each other. But it also reveals a deep human desire to be connected to each other and to the earth. In the biblically-informed language of the Christian tradition, how are we creatures made in God's image rightly to fulfil our

calling to be *Homo faber* in ways that make for shalom? How does this open and inviting communion, the open circle of the Trinity, extend to the rest of creation?

While the authors provide some hints of an alternative vision, much more needs to be said about what specific social arrangements and policies are most faithful to a Christian vision of shalom and conducive of healthy communities and liveable, neighborly places. *What can and what should we do*—in our homes, churches, cities, colleges and universities—to foster the kind of community that makes for a flourishing creation? How do we live, as Aldo Leopold put it years ago, as plain members and citizens of our biotic communities, rather than as conquerors? Or in more explicit Christian terms, how do we faithfully bear witness *now* to God's good future of shalom—of a heaven and earth renewed and redeemed and transfigured? ♦

### Acknowledgment

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002).
- <sup>2</sup>Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and Loren Wilkinson, "The New Story of Creation: A Trinitarian Perspective," *Crux* XXX, 4 (December 1994): 26-36.
- <sup>3</sup>John R. Schneider, *The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Wealth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).
- <sup>4</sup>David N. Livingstone, *Putting Science in Its Place: Geographies of Scientific Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- <sup>5</sup>Jeremy Rifkin, *The Biotech Century* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1998).
- <sup>6</sup>Robert David Sack, *Homo Geographicus: A Framework for Action, Awareness, and Moral Concern* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 22-9.
- <sup>7</sup>For example, Douglas J. Hall, "The Spirituality of the Covenant: Imaging God, Stewarding Earth," *Perspectives* (December 1988): 11-4.
- <sup>8</sup>John R. Wood, "Biophilia and the Gospel: Loving Nature or Worshipping God?" in *Living in the LambLight: Christianity and Contemporary Challenges to the Gospel*, ed. Hans Boersma (Vancouver: Regent College, 2001), 153-76.
- <sup>9</sup>Kenneth R. Young and Karl S. Zimmerer, eds., *Nature's Geography: New Lessons for Conservation in Developing Countries* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).
- <sup>10</sup>See Susan Bratton, "Loving Nature: Eros or Agape?" *Environmental Ethics* 14 (Spring 1992): 3-24; Janel Curry-Roper, "Recovering a Covenantal Sense of Place," *Perspectives* (June/July 1999): 8-10; Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001); Brueggemann, *The Land*; and John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).