

Fill the Earth and Subdue It (Gen. 1:28)

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Abstract

This paper is aimed at finding out whether or not the current state of environmental crisis as claimed by Lyn White, is due to the anthropocentric perspective of Christianity as expressed in the Creation narrative where man was given the injunction “to subdue” and “have dominion” over nature. As will be shown, the early expositors viewed the biblical terms symbolically while the early modern interpretations support an exploitative engagement with nature with the advocacy to restore nature to its original state after its harmony was disrupted by sin. As to the anthropocentric emphasis of Christianity, it was evident in earlier interpretations, but it faded during the early modern interpretations of the biblical text.

Introduction

The gradual depletion of the ozone layer and the related greenhouse effect has now reached crisis proportion as a consequence of industrial growth, massive urban concentrations and vastly increased energy needs. Industrial waste, the burning of fossil fuels, unrestricted deforestation, the use of certain types of herbicides, coolants and propellants, all of these are known to harm the atmosphere and the environment (Henning, 2009, p. 183). This led many to conclude that we are in the midst of an environmental crisis.

Confronted with the relentless degradation of the environment, the Church cannot stand idle. Accordingly, environmental themes form an integral part of the Catholic Social

Teaching (CST). Thus, to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (literally, of revolutionary change), Pope Paul VI on May 14, 1971, issued the Apostolic Letter *Octogesima Adveniens* (literally, Eightieth Anniversary). While this document dwells on the social problems ushered by urbanization, it also contains a section on the environment where he pointed out that “Man is suddenly becoming aware that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature, he risks destroying it and becoming in his turn the victim of this degradation” (Pope Paul VI, 1971, No. 21).

Although concern for the environment in Catholic Social Teaching is reflected in other Church’s documents such as *Justitia in Mundo* (Justice in the World) where the Catholic Bishops held that the irreparable damage to the basic elements of life on earth, like air and water is caused by the insatiable demand for resources and energy by richer nations, whether capitalist or socialist (World Synod of Catholic Bishops, 1971, No. 11), it was Pope John Paul II who laid a firmer theological foundation for environmental concern with his encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* (Redeemer of Man) where he cited Rom 8:19-22 as an example of creation groaning and linked it to the suffering of the natural world” (John Paul II, 1979, no. 8). Thus, in his speech entitled “The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility,” delivered on January 1, 1990 during the World Day of Peace, he declared that the ecological crisis is a moral issue (John Paul II, 1990). Following in this tradition, Pope Benedict XVI in his address during the 2008 World Peace Day, argued that “we need to care for the environment” (Henning, p. 184).

While the pervasive ecological crisis is due to a number of causes, the historian Lyn White in his controversial article the “Historical Root of our Ecologic Crisis,” considered Christianity as one of the ideological source of the current environmental woes (White, 1967, p. 1206). In his article White held that our view of nature is “deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion.” And “Christianity in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia’s religions...not

only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploits nature for his proper ends" (White, p. 1205)

This attitude towards nature white held, is reflected in the Book of Genesis where God said: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living that moves upon the earth" (1:28). Interpreting this text White claimed, "God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes" (White, 1967, p. 1206). Due to Christianity's anthropocentric and exploitative tendencies, "it bears a huge burden of guilt for environmental deterioration" (White, p. 1203-7).

Although a historian, White claims were made on the basis of his interpretation of the creation story in Gen. 1:28. While his article was published at a time when ecological crisis was on its nascent stage, White's perspective have attracted considerable criticism and is debated to this date. Accordingly, this paper is aimed at investigating whether or not Gen. 1:28 supports the view that Christianity contributed to the current degradation of the environment and natural world.

In interpreting Gen. 1:28, this research is cognizant that the text is historically and culturally bound. This imposes a twofold task. In investigating the text, there is a need not only to understand the history behind the text, but also the text itself which history has produced (Bergant, 1989, p. 22). Hence, in this investigation this research will employ the historical-literary analyses of Gen. 1:28 (Houden, 1995, p. 13). Moreover, although the above approach can shed light on the historical context and the meaning of Gen. 1:28, it cannot bring out the full meaning of the text. Accordingly, this research will not limit itself to "excavative reading" of the text (Alter, 1981, p. 13), but conscious effort will be made to relate the text to the current debate on the current crisis on the environment.

The Context of the Book of Genesis

The Book of Genesis is the story of the pre-history of Israel which became a nation only when it occupied and ruled Canaan. This nation identified itself as a federation of tribes in covenant with a God who brought them out of slavery and led them to the Promised Land. But as this nation consolidated its traditions that spoke of the actions of God in the past, Israel realized that even prior to the Exodus, God was at work leading them to that defining moment. Thus, Exodus was seen as crucial event in a process that began when God called Abraham with the promise to make him a great nation.

In time this nation began to view its own history in the context of world history, and appended to its story the provenance of the universe and the history of humanity in the primeval period.

The Book of Genesis recounts two stories of creation. The first story which deals with the creation of the world is narrated in Gen. 1:1-2:3. The second story which dwells on the creation of the man and the woman, their offspring, and the spread of civilization, is found in Gen 2:4-4:26..

According to the first story, God created the animals and man only at the end of the six days. After creating man, God gives him the following mandate:

Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth (Gen. 1:28)

The above passage contains two Hebrew verbs *kabash* which means to "subdue," "to master," "to bring forcefully under control" (Clifford & Roland, 11) and the verb *rada* which aside from "dominion," is also construed to mean "the working " or "tilling the ground" (Harrison, 1999, p. 88). Clarifying these terms will provide the answer to whether or not White was justified in

attributing the ecological crisis in part to the Judeo-Christian doctrine of creation.

Interpretations of Gen. 1:28

It has been held that Patristic and medieval accounts of human dominion are not primarily concerned with the exploitation of the natural world. Their interpretation, for instance, of “dominion over the beasts” is anchored on the ancient view of the human person as a microcosm of the world. They interpreted dominion as being directed to the human soul. Thus, the “dominion over nature” in Gen. 1:28 was interpreted by the Fathers of the Church to mean dominion over the rebellious beast within a person. This interpretation of dominion was exemplified by St Augustine of Hippo when he wrote that the beast “signify the affections of the soul.” And the unruly impulses of the body are deemed animals that “serve reason when they are restrained from their deadly ways” (Augustine, 1991, p. 291). The biblical injunction “have dominion” was thus understood during the patristic period, as an incentive to restrain carnal impulses and bring them under the control of reason.

This allegorical interpretation of biblical texts prevalent during the Middle Ages was also extended to knowledge of the nature. Knowledge of things was not undertaken to bring nature under human control, but to throw light on the meanings of nature and of the Scriptures. As such, living things were presumed to have been created not only to serve the physical needs of human being, but also to serve spiritual purposes. Under this perspective, nature should not be understood for the purpose of exploitation but to ascertain its meaning in terms of the spiritual life of the believer.

This understanding of nature is best exemplified by *Physiologus* which originated in Alexandria between the second and fifth centuries. This work pointed out the moral and theological importance of natural objects. Although this work did not provide a scientific view of nature, living things were invested with moral and theological functions. For example, *Physiologus* described the fox in this manner:

The fox is an entirely deceitful manner who plays tricks. If he is hungry and finds nothing to eat, he seeks out the rubbish pit. Then throwing himself on the back, he stares upwards, draws in his breath, and thoroughly bloats himself up. Now the birds, thinking the fox dead, descends upon him to devour him. But he stretches out and seizes them, and the birds themselves dies a miserable death.

The fox is a figure of the devil. To those who live according to the flesh, he pretends to be dead. Although he may hold sinners in his gullet, to spiritual men and those perfected in faith, however, he is dead and reduced to nothing (*Physiologus*, 1979, pp. 27-28).

The purpose of the story is to convey an important lesson and to inspire the faithful. Nature was not solely nor primarily created to provide for the material needs of human beings, but to provide moral and spiritual lessons.

With the translation of the works of Aristotle in Latin in the thirteenth century, the Western world was afforded another source of knowledge of the natural world. Yet, in these materials one will be hard pressed to find any ideology that condones exploitation of nature. Unlike the allegorical interpretation of the text, the new emphasis in the translated works is on the “intellectual mastery of the knowledge of living things.. It held that Adam once enjoyed a perfect knowledge of nature (Cf. Gen. 2:20). With the fall, he and his progeny was estranged from God and lost that knowledge.. Thus, to re-acquire that lost knowledge of creatures is to restore in a way, the original dominion that human beings once enjoyed (Harrison, 1999, p. 93).

The alteration of nature on a large scale took place during the middle ages. Though essentially devoted to spiritual works, monks likewise pursued mundane activities to meet bodily needs. As part of their communal life, they engaged in agriculture, husbandry and transformed woods and swamps into fields

and pastures. This industry of the monks, suggests a religious motivated attempt to conquer nature. Their engagement, however, with the natural world was not aimed at asserting dominion over nature, but to enable them to be more closely attached to God but being paradoxically detached from material nature (Leclerg, 1974, p. 165).

While moral and intellectual dominion pervaded the middle ages, the “dominion over the earth” came to be understood in the following centuries not with the exercise of control in the intellectual realm, but of the natural world. This is attributed to several interrelated factors: the demise of the idea of microcosm which confined features of the natural world in the human psyche; the replacement of the Aristotelian though with a mechanical world view; the collapse of the symbolist mentality of the Middle Ages which resulted in the denial of the transcendental significance of nature; the appearance of Protestantism with its work ethic; and the new hermeneutics of modernity which advocates the literal interpretation of the text as its true meaning. Among these factors, it is the literal interpretation of the text advocated by the Protestants which provided a new interpretation of the biblical injunction “have dominion.” (See Brooke, 1991, pp. 82-116).

Throughout the earliest centuries of Christianity the primary focus of most interpretations was on the message. Hence the task of an interpreter was to translate this message into the new world or word of meaning. Thus, by the Middle Ages the literal interpretation of the Bible, together with other types of hermeneutics (allegorical, moral, and eschatological), had been developed (Brown & Schneiders, 1993, p. 1155).

Unlike the allegorical approach which holds that the biblical text really intends to say something other than which its literal wording suggests, the literal approach to interpreting the text underscores the literal sense of a text or to the meaning that the words themselves convey. This means that the text is accepted at face value. This understanding implies that the receiver or the

reader immediately understands the meaning intended by the author (Bergant, 1994, p. 24)..

Applied to the biblical imperative “have dominion,” commentators of the period took the phrase literally to mean actual exercise of power over nature. This means that the beast of Genesis no longer pertain to carnal desires that should be restrained or bridled by reason, but nature should be literally controlled or governed by human beings.

This new understanding of “have dominion” is best illustrated by Francis Bacon. In the *Novum Organum*, he wrote: “Let the human race recover that right over nature which belongs to it by divine bequest” (Montuschi,, 2010, p. 8).

According to Bacon with sin, man lost his original dominion over nature as symbolically represented in the Book of Genesis when God asks Adam to name the animals. As a result of his expulsion from the Garden of Eden, man was consigned to a life of hard labor if only to ensure his own survival. Although a result of sin, work is also a means for mastering the world according to God’s plan. Accordingly, knowledge of both practical and abstract matters must be seen as useful tools for human action and redemption. This new science which combines knowledge and action should be viewed according to Bacon as “a rich storehouse for the glory of God and the good of humanity” (As quoted by Montuschi, 2010).

Bacon’s view appears to favour the idea that man’s unbridled exploitation of nature is not only possible and necessary, but it is consistent with the Christian tenet of dominion. Thus, he was branded as the symbol of the “impious will to dominate nature and tyrannize mankind” (Rossi, 1996, p. 43). However, various interpretations of Bacon’s philosophy suggest otherwise.

Although Bacon advocated the use of science to improve human condition, he also espoused the view that science should be ethically accountable for its results in the same manner man should be accountable to God for his use of knowledge. Moreover, his notion of dominion is not utilitarian, but socially

driven. For him, nature must be mastered and used in the service of human life. By suggesting a more balanced view on dominion, man is portrayed not only as a ruler of nature, but a despot who respects and cooperates with nature (Montuschi, p. 24).

The final impetus for the engagement with the material world was ushered when the biblical injunction “have dominion” was linked to property ownership and colonization. As held by John Locke, “Land became private property when it was improved by clearing, planting, cultivation, or stocking of animals” (Quoted by Harrison, p. 101). It was held that this view was based on the story of creation in the Book of Genesis where God commanded Adam to subdue the earth. Thus, any one in obedience to this Divine injunction who clears, plants, and develops the land, owns the land as his private property. Conversely, those who occupied lands, but do nothing to develop them, can be legitimately divested of these lands. This thought seminal of John Locke provided justification to powerful entities and countries to embark on overseas colonization, activities which were deemed moral and ethical as they were in keeping with the Christian tenet enshrined in the Book of Genesis 1:28: “Fill the earth and subdue it.”

This exploitative view of nature in vogue during this time, was aptly summarized by John Ray, a clergyman and a naturalist, who held that God “...is well pleased with the Industry of Man in adorning the Earth with beautiful Cities and Castles, with pleasant Villages and Country Houses, with regular Gardens and Orchards and Plantations.” Moreover, following the same thought, he also pointed out that Europe is conspicuously different from “a rude and unpolished America, peopled with slothful and naked Indians” (Montuschi, p. 10). With such outlook, Ray not only offered a justification for colonization, but an excuse that was in line with the biblical imperative “Fill the earth and subdue it.”

In sum, the development of the concept of private property together with the material gains associated with colonization, were based on the biblical terms “subdue” and “have

dominion” in the Creation story. Thus, this narrative not only provided the impetus to explore, but to exploit nature as well. No longer interpreted in the allegorical or in the moral sense, “subdue” and “have dominion” are biblical injunctions solely construed to refer to the natural world perceived during the period to be subordinate and subservient to man and therefore, to be exploited to serve his needs.

The foregoing interpretation of the relevant biblical terms in Genesis seem to support the exploitative view of nature. However, a close examination of the interpretive understanding of “dominion” during the seventeenth century would show that the term was consistently associated with the fall of Adam. Prior to his disobedience, Adam exercised dominion over nature and all living things as evidenced by his ability to give names to all creatures (Gen. 2:18). However, as a consequence of his fall, such dominion was not only lost, other misfortunes also befell upon him.

The Book of Genesis narrates two stories of creation. According to the first story, God created the animals and man only at the end of the six days. God gives man the following injunction:

Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen. 1:28).

As man was placed at the center of the created universe, he is to be a ruler and he is responsible to God for whatever he does on earth. Through his direction, nature acquires order and purpose.

According to the second story, the order of creation begins with man, followed by plants, animals, and finally by the woman. Adam is put in the Garden of Eden, to cultivate and to make it prosper (Gen. 2:15). In this creation story, man is portrayed as a caretaker of the nature which is portrayed as a well ordered garden to be enjoyed. Adam upsets this

harmonious co-existence between man and nature. Together with Eve, they are expelled from Eden, and the conditions of the land to which they are consigned changes dramatically. The land ceases to be a friendly garden any longer and nature is described as hostile. If man is to survive, he must now dominate nature through back breaking and demanding labor (Gen. 2:17-19).

Viewed in the above context, the early modern interpretations of the relevant text did not see dominion over the natural world in the exploitative sense. On the contrary, they invariably interpreted "dominion" in the restorative sense of bringing back nature to its original and perfect condition. This restorative outlook was expressed by Thomas Traherne, a Metaphysical poet, when he wrote that the earth "had been a Wilderness overgrown with Thorns, and Wild Beasts, and Serpents: Which now by the Labor of many hands, is reduced to the Beauty and Order of Eden" (Harrison, p. 103).

In the same vein, Francis Bacon expressed the same thought:

For man by the fall fell from the state of innocency and from his dominion over creation. Both of these losses however can even in this life be in some part repaired: the former by religion and faith, the latter by arts and sciences (quoted by Montuschi, p. 23).

Overall, the understanding of "to subdue" and "have dominion" through engagement with nature during this period, did not espouse an exploitative attitude towards nature and living things, but advocated a concern for its restoration to its pristine condition.

The early modern hermeneutics of the relevant terms in Genesis also belie the claim that the ideology endorsing the exploitation of nature was partly due to the alleged anthropocentric tenet of Christianity which views the created world as subservient to man. A cursory look into the interpretations by commentators of the period shows

otherwise. In fact, expositors of the period were the first ones who challenged such anthropocentric perspective. Many churchmen and scientists in the seventeenth century who adhered to the creation story were critical of the view that nature and living things were created solely and primarily to serve man. "Robert Boyle, one of the fathers of modern chemistry, described the idea as erroneous. William Derham thought it a vulgar error. Fellow physico-theologian John Ray agreed that it was vulgarly received that all this visible world was created for man, but that Wise Men now think otherwise.. Thomas Burnet...regarded as absurd the belief that the earth and the myriad celestial bodies were designed for use by the meanest of all the Intelligent Creatures. Anthromorphism was an opinion, wrote Archbishop William King, attended with inextricable difficulties." (Harrison, p. 104).

Among the avid critics of Anthromorphism were the Copernicans. With the invention of the telescope, it was discovered that the sun and not the earth, is the center of the Universe. Since the earth is not the center, this insignificant planet could not serve as the home of the creature that was supposedly the apex of creation. With this view backed up by scientific findings, the Anthromorphic belief which dominated early hermeneutics became untenable.

With anthromorphism taking the back stage, active engagement with natural world took its place. This development was ushered in a way by Francis Bacon, As previously discussed, Bacon held that with the fall of Adam, man lost his dominion over the created world. But man's original dominion over nature that was lost due to the fall can be partially repaired or restored through human industry aided by science. Therefore, man's conquest of nature is not only possible, but also necessary.

Conclusion

As pointed out earlier, Lyn White attributed the current state of environment degradation to the Christian religion. He held that with its anthropocentric outlook, not only did Christianity established a dualism between man and nature; it also held that it is God's will that man exploits nature to serve his purpose. This attitude towards nature is embodied in the Creation Story when in Gen. 1:28, man was enjoined "to subdue" and "have dominion"

The preceding discussions have shown that although Lyn White pointed out to the pertinent biblical text as one of the causes for the unrestrained exploitation of nature, it is downright erroneous that he considered the creation story and its relevant biblical text as major influence in the degradation of the environment. Our investigation of the hermeneutics of Gen. 1:28 reveals that it was only in the early modern period that we find evidence on the explicit connection between the creation narrative and the exploitation of nature. Prior to this period, such connection was palpably absent.

The investigation likewise shows that White's assumption that the wanton disregard for the environment was due to the anthropocentric tendencies of Christianity is bereft of basis. Indeed, during the early era of Christianity, anthropocentrism was hardly questioned. But with the advances made in the field of science and technology, Anthropocentrism lost its otherwise firm grip. Dislodged from its pedestal, its place was taken over by human industry aided by science in its engagement with nature. Although such engagement has yielded countless fruits for man, the same engagement indisputably contributed in no small measure, in the destruction of the environment.

Indeed, the current state of environment calls for a shift in man's attitude towards the created nature. However, efforts to forestall further injury to the environment with the end of making it sustainable for the present and future needs of man, should recognize that nature as viewed by early interpreters, is in fallen state. Thus, it behooves humanity to

redeem nature from centuries of uncontrolled abuse, preserve and restore the natural condition of nature.

Finally, the current environmental destruction is partly attributed to the traditional theological belief that God is a transcendental being removed or distant from the realm of the created world. Such belief lends support to the secular tendency for absolute control of nature. As opposed to the foregoing, the early modern interpretations of the biblical narrative of creation and fall, provides us an ecological sensitive theology with its emphasis that the world was created by God. By recognizing God's sovereignty over the created world "only then can we discern an objective moral order within which to articulate a code of environmental ethics which advocate responsibility towards self, towards others, towards creation" (John Paul II & Bartholomew I, 2002, p. 2).

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