



IS GOD GREEN?

Lionel Windsor

Is God Green?

© Lionel Windsor 2018

All rights reserved. Except as may be permitted by the Copyright Act, no part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without prior permission from the publisher. Please direct all copyright enquiries and permission requests to the publisher.

Matthias Media

(St Matthias Press Ltd ACN 067 558 365)

Email: info@matthiasmedia.com.au

Internet: www.matthiasmedia.com.au

Please visit our website for current postal and telephone contact information.

Matthias Media (USA)

Email: sales@matthiasmedia.com

Internet: www.matthiasmedia.com

Please visit our website for current postal and telephone contact information.

Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ISBN 978 1 925424 31 7

Cover design by Matthias Media.

Typesetting by Lankshear Design.

CONTENTS

1. The view from above	7
2. In the beginning: God, people and the world	17
3. The broken image	27
4. The restored image	37
5. The future of the world	47
6. While you wait	59
Postscript: What is a tree for?	67
Acknowledgements	69

*For Nathan Chang: friend, erstwhile colleague,
partner in ministry, brother in Christ.*

A decorative background pattern of stylized, light gray leaves and branches, scattered across the page. The leaves are elongated and pointed, with some showing vein details.

1

THE VIEW FROM ABOVE

ALMOST 50 YEARS AGO, in 1972, the crew of the Apollo 17 space mission took the first full-view photo of planet Earth as they made their way to the moon. For the first time ever, humanity saw an image of the whole planet from afar. They saw the clouds, the land, the oceans sitting there: whirling, powerful, innocent, vulnerable. This view from above was emblematic of a revolution taking place in the hearts and imaginations of millions around the planet. The world was no longer being regarded as an endless vista of untapped resources and infinite possibilities. Instead, we began to realize how small, how fragile, and how very delicate our home really is. No longer were environmental issues confined to a few marginal voices. Together, we started to become very anxious about what we were doing to this lonely globe. Since then, this anxiety has only increased. Fifty years on, our news feeds are full of stories relating

to our environment and ecological concerns: sustainability, climate change, species diversity, air pollution, soil contamination, deforestation, landfill and radioactive waste, to name but a few.

How do you feel about these issues? Are you worried? Distracted? Anxious? Complacent? Resigned? Apathetic? Confident? Skeptical?

This is a book about how the Bible's teaching relates to environmental issues. If you're a Christian, I hope this book will encourage you to think and act even more in line with God's word. If you're not a Christian, I hope this book will help you to understand what the Bible teaches about God's plan for our world. I pray that you will see that there is wonderful, good news for you and for our world—even in the midst of the bad news.

In the late 1990s, before I commenced my formal Christian ministry training, I worked as a solar energy engineer. I've preached on environmental issues several times over the years. Over that time, I've noticed that the general consensus on ecological issues has changed. In the 90s, people who cared about the environment were on the fringe, often seen by the majority as a bit weird and alternative. Not long after that, environmental issues became a little more fashionable. Now, it's fair to say that ecological consciousness is part of the air we breathe. Everyone cares about the environment now—it's not even fashionable any more; it's just a given.

The way Christians have approached the issue seems to have reflected these general trends. Take, for example, *The Green Bible*. The preface states:

Many Bibles, called “red-letter editions,” have Jesus’ direct statements printed in red. We have adapted this practice to introduce the “green-letter edition.” In it we highlight the rich and varied ways the books of the Bible speak directly to how we should think and act as we confront the environmental crisis facing our planet... Essays from respected conservationists and theologians highlight important themes related to God’s care of creation and show how to read the Bible through a “green lens.” Cumulatively, the essays lay out an excellent and broad vision for the central calling on Christian lives to care for God’s creation.¹

But rather than approaching God’s word through the “green lens” of environmental concerns, let’s start the other way round: let’s approach environmental concerns through the lens of God’s word. Why? If we really want to come to grips with environmental concerns, we actually need to take a step back first. We need to see the true ‘view from above’. We need to get a firmer grasp on the Bible’s whole message—from beginning to end. We first need to understand God, his Son Jesus Christ, and his purposes for us and for our world. Once we do that, we can understand more clearly how best to think and act in regard to the ecological issues that are all around us. That’s what this book is all about.

1 *The Green Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, HarperOne, San Francisco, 2008, 1.15-16.

Clearing away the ‘isms’

The way we think about, talk about and act towards our world is profoundly shaped by the way we view our world. But our view of the world isn't always obvious, even to us. We seldom stop to consider what our view of the world really is, or where this view has come from. In fact, we often hold various contradictory views of the world in our heads all at once. This is true of everyone, including Christians. We can easily assume that our particular stance on environmental issues is biblical, when it may simply be a view we've absorbed from somewhere else—parents, teachers, friends, movies, celebrities, social media news feeds, etc.

So before we start looking at the Bible's view of the world, it's worth taking a quick look at a few alternative views, or 'isms', that have shaped people's thinking and actions when it comes to our world and its ecology. These 'isms' are often in the background when environmental issues are being discussed. They can often affect our own assumptions, whether consciously or unconsciously. If we can identify these 'isms' for what they really are, we'll be in a better position to examine our own assumptions about the world, and compare them with what the Bible teaches.

Dualism

Dualism is a view that's thousands of years old, but it's still around today in various forms. The idea of dualism is that there are two ('dual') realms: the spiritual realm and the material realm. In the higher, spiritual realm are

souls, angels, eternity, God, etc. In the lower, material realm is matter, change, bodies, the earth, etc. If you're a dualist, then you think the higher realm is better and more important than the lower, physical realm.

How do you treat the environment if you're a dualist? There are two possibilities.

You could see the environment as ugly, evil and distracting to the soul, and something to be avoided. So when you hear about environmental issues, you ignore them; you shut yourself into a monastery and contemplate only the spiritual realm.

Alternatively, as a dualist, you could join in the abuse of the environment, because it's not really important. Who cares about the environment? It doesn't matter. It's not spiritual. It's just matter. You can do what you like with it.

Some Christians have been attracted to dualism. In fact, the apostle Paul had to combat dualism, because Christians were in danger of falling into a form of it:

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer. (1 Tim 4:1-5)

Even today, Christians can be in danger of embracing dualism in various forms. Perhaps your own response to the environment is dualistic? Perhaps you think the material world is unimportant? Perhaps you avoid it, or just don't care about it at all? As we'll see shortly, that's not a biblical way to view the world. The Bible teaches that the world is good, because it's God's creation. So our response to creation should not be to despise it, but to give thanks to God for it.

Materialism

A second popular view of the world is called *materialism*. If you're a materialist in the strong (philosophical) sense, you believe there is no distinct spiritual world. The material world is all that exists, or at least all that really matters.

This philosophical materialism often ends up fostering a 'materialist' lifestyle. Materialism as a lifestyle considers the world primarily as something to be *owned* and *used*. If you're a materialist, you can use the world however you like, because there's no higher power or spiritual value to tell you what to do. You can buy whatever make-up you feel like—who cares if it's tested on animals? You can leave the lights on at home, and burn up as much carbon as you feel like, because matter is matter. As long as you're happy, who really cares what you do?

The former Soviet Union was founded on communal materialist principles. The Aral Sea in the Soviet Union was once the size of Tasmania. Over the 20th century, this great sea shrank by 90% as its waters were diverted

for irrigation of cotton farms to bring wealth to the Soviet Union. What is left is heavily polluted by weapons testing, industrial projects, and fertilizer run-off. Apparently, the disappearance of a whole sea the size of Tasmania was no surprise to the Soviets; they planned for it to happen! This might sound surprising, but it makes perfect sense in a materialist mindset. A sea is just a sea. Drain the sea to grow your cotton if it makes your society better.

Of course, this isn't the only possible way of thinking for materialists. After all, if you're a materialist, you might start to get a bit worried if you think the world won't sustain your wasteful behaviour. You might start to realize that if you *keep* draining seas then maybe there won't be any seas left. This would be very inconvenient for you because you can't grow any more cotton—or at least it would be inconvenient for your biological offspring who will carry your DNA into the next generation. Where would they ride their jet skis? So you might do something about the environment, but only because you are afraid that your (or your descendants') lifestyle will be affected.

Spoiler alert: the Bible doesn't give us a materialist vision of the world, because it tells us that God is real and different from the material world! Yet the Bible constantly warns people—including believers—against the dangers of a materialist lifestyle. Here again is the apostle Paul:

Godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot

take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs. (1 Tim 6:6-10)

Christians today can also be in danger of embracing a materialist lifestyle. This is especially true in affluent Western nations. We're surrounded by stuff and bombarded by ads that tell us that our greatest happiness in life will come by owning and consuming all the stuff. We throw out two-year-old phones so we can buy the newest one, and then we use the phone to go online and see even more ads that tell us to buy more stuff. Combine that with the relentless busyness of much of modern life, which means we don't even have time to stop and think about how much we're consuming and throwing away, and it's a recipe for disaster. But we *do* need to stop and think. Perhaps your own response to the environment is too materialist? We need to remember that materialism—whether as a philosophy or a lifestyle—is as unbiblical, and ultimately as harmful, as dualism.

Pantheism

In our world, there are many reactions against materialism. People seem to instinctively recognize how selfish and wrong it is. They know that the world is more than

just a thing to be consumed and abused. One solution, which has become popular amongst certain sectors of the environmental movement, is to embrace *pantheism*.

Pantheists believe in a god, in a sense. However, they believe that this god is in the world—indeed, the world itself is divine (*pan*=everything, *theos*=god). It might be called ‘Mother Nature’ or ‘Gaia’. For a pantheist, the world is one big interconnected organism. All things have equal value and equal status as part of that whole. We must give the greatest respect to everything in nature—plants, animals, indeed the whole ecosystem. Humans have no right to use nature for our own ends.

Yet part of the problem with pantheism is that it struggles to find a distinct and positive place for humanity. Indeed, humanity is often seen in a negative light. All we’ve done is mess things up, so the best we can do is to leave nature pristine, remove our footprints, stop producing offspring, etc. In fact, some have argued that humanity is a cancerous growth that Mother Nature is fighting against!² Pantheism can breed great fear and anxiety. Maybe Mother Nature will prevail against our carbon production, producing massive storms and tsunamis that wipe us out as a species? How do we know?

The Bible doesn’t give us a pantheistic view of the world. God and the world are distinct, and humanity has a distinct place. But because pantheistic ideas have

2 See for example James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia: Why the Earth is Fighting Back—and How We Can Still Save Humanity*, Penguin Books, London, 2007.

become so popular in sectors of the environmental movement, they often affect the way that the general public—including Christians—think and talk about the environment. We need to be aware, in case our own responses to environmental issues are more pantheistic than biblical.

God, the world and you

Each of the ‘isms’ we’ve looked at has problems, because it neglects something important. Dualism neglects the importance of the world. Materialism neglects the importance of God. Pantheism neglects the importance of humanity (and ultimately God). So what about the Bible? If the Bible is not dualistic or materialistic or pantheistic, what is it? What’s the Bible’s view from above? Is God green at all? Does he even care about the world?

To answer that, we’re going to explore the story the Bible tells us about God and humanity and the world. In fact, the Bible has a lot to say about the world. It talks about where the world came from, the state it’s in, and the future that’s in store for it. It tells us that God is intimately involved in this story of the world. And so are we. As we understand the Bible’s story, it will help us work out how to think and feel and act rightly towards that world, and to make a positive difference.