



Readings II in Faith & Science

Publication Year: 2003

ID: BK023

*Note: This book is out of print.
This is one article from the book. All the articles are available for
download as pdf's from the ITEST web site. A complete listing of the
articles available from this book is shown at the end of this document.*

Some Environmental Issues

ID: BK023-034

Father Robert Brungs, SJ
Director of ITEST
Associate Professor (Emeritus) of Physics
Saint Louis University



Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology

Cardinal Rigali Center • 20 Archbishop May Drive • Suite 3400-A • St. Louis, Missouri 63119 • USA
314.792.7220 • www.faithscience.org • E-mail: mariannepost@archstl.org

Some Environmental Issues

[Robert Brungs, SJ, Director of ITEST, received his AB in Classics from Bellarmine College, Plattsburgh, New York and a PhL. From Fordham University. He earned a PhD in Physics from Saint Louis University and a Licentiate in Sacred Theology (STL) from Woodstock College in Maryland. Father Brungs has served as a consultant for the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Believers and the Committee on Science and Human Values of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. He has also held consultantships for several other organizations. He is the author of several books dealing with aspects of the faith/science relationship (see for example, **The Vineyard, Scientists in the Church**, co-edited with Eva-Maria Amrhein located on the ITEST website) and many articles on the same topic. He taught physics and theology at Saint Louis University for several years before assuming full time duties with ITEST.]

There are high stakes for the Church in various issues in the “environmental crisis.” It would be well to be aware of them. Here I shall mention one or two to show some of the deeper concerns that are hardly ever, if ever, articulated. Consider the Endangered Species Act. Three articles in the January, 1992 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* are worth taking the time to research. They spell out in some detail the economic and social implications of this Act. I will concentrate on the religious issues which are quite profound.

In essence, the Endangered Species Act is designed to protect *all* endangered species. It is extremely rigid. In trying to protect everything, it will probably succeed in protecting nothing. That, however, is not its prime religious aspect. Environmentalists see this Act as built on what is called the Noah Principle: “all our fellow passengers on Spaceship Earth . . . have a right to exist” is the way the Ehrlichs express it in their book *Extinction*.

That statement is compatible with a Christian understanding provided we don’t carry it to the next step and, as many environmentalists do, assume that each species has the same right to exist, including the human. Because all species are precious and have intrinsic worth, human beings have a moral responsibility to each and every one. This is what many environmentalists mean by stewardship. It is what I would call cosmic piety. It is the imposition of a moral responsibility on humans when they have neither the information, the wisdom nor the resources to carry it out. There is nothing moral in that kind of obligation.

What is at stake here theologically is the whole Christian perspective on the creation. E. O. Wilson and Paul Ehrlich wrote in *Science* in August, 1991:

. . . the first step (to halt the apparently accelerating extinction of species) . . . would be to cease “developing” any more relatively undisturbed land. Every new shopping center built in the California chaparral, every hectare of tropical forest cut and burned, every swamp converted into a rice paddy or shrimp farm means less biodiversity. . . . [Even so,] ending direct human incursions into remaining relatively undisturbed habitats would *only be a start* (my emphasis). . . . The indispensable strategy for saving our fellow living creatures and ourselves in the long run is . . . to reduce the scale of human activities.

The assumption here, of course, is that biodiversity is the highest law of the planet. It is the criterion by which all human activity is to be judged. Is this consistent with a Christian view of creation and of the place of the human in that creation? Is the protection, for instance, of *every species* a definition of the Christian notion of stewardship? This is a growing activity for and praise of any form of biodiversity. The pace of extending this notion is growing. Is biodiversity the highest law of the universe of all living things?

At the risk of being labeled anthropocentric, I believe that humans, with the ability to reason and to love, are the summit of the material creation. This is especially true since God sent his Son as one of us, not as a dung beetle or a whale. What could be more anthropocentric than to think that we can save all species? As I noted earlier, we have neither the information, the wisdom nor the resources to do so. To suppose that we have is arrogant nonsense. We have absolutely no idea of even the number of species, much less any details about them.

I see three ways in which humans can approach environmental issues of this magnitude. The first is the way the Ehrlichs approach it -- essentially creating a god (or, perhaps, goddess?) named Biodiversity to whom all humans pay homage and whose prophets are “scientific” environmentalists. All human behavior is to be circumscribed by the putative needs of every species. This is an essentially misanthropic view of reality: “the only problem we have is humanity and human activity.”

Paradoxically enough, the prophets of Biodiversity look to these same humans for the survival of planetary biotic systems. In a sense, this is a “scientific” counterpoint to the romantic American myth of the wilderness popularized by James Fenimore Cooper in *The Leatherstocking Tales*. In its more extreme forms this approach would advocate not leaving any trace of our being here, no achievement, not even a footprint to indicate that we have lived. Strangely, the proponents of this position praise the mounds left by the Indians because they’re evidence of a high culture.

Still, the position that we leave no trace is antithetical to a Christianity that sees us as co-creators, sacramentally building with and in Christ the New Jerusalem. If we are true to our baptismal warrant, we must leave some trace of our passing. Things (and people) will (ideally) be more beautiful because we passed through.

Another way to approach the issue has already been tried -- unfortunately. It essentially says that only the human is important -- especially me. “Take care of Number One.” We’ve all met these people, and they’re just as hard on other human beings as they are on the environment, if not harder. If anything is clear from Christian history, *laissez-faire* behavior of any stripe is not sanctioned by the law of God. This approach is not compatible with the Faith, even though, I’m afraid, it has been attributed to Christianity by many writers, including the historian Lynn White in his *Science* article of thirty years ago. *Christianity has condemned this attitude in a multitude of other situations and issues and there is no need to repeat the condemnation here. All we need do is recall that Christ came to serve and not to be served.*

The third way is truly the Christian way -- to make the difficult choices that take into account the need for humans and the need for biodiversity. The hard work must be done to reconcile conflicting (or seemingly conflicting) needs of humans and non-humans. Even though Christianity maintains that “sub-human” creation is in the service of humans, it does not provide any approval of greed. The Book of Genesis speaks of “subduing and conquering,” not of “raping and despoiling.” We must look to the 13th chapter of the Gospel of St. John for the full description of mastery over creation: “You call me Lord and Master, and rightly; so I am. If I, then, the Lord and Master have washed your feet, you should wash each other’s feet.” Like any other book, not all the answers in scripture are to be found fully explained on the first page. In fact, not all the answers have been written. That is an on-going task in the Church and its fulfillment depends on each of us.

Our first priority is to enlarge in our hearts the vision of a creation in *Christ*. The whole creation, groaning in birth pangs awaiting the children of God, is being re-created in the image of God-with-us. We do have obligations to protect and foster the planetary environment. It is not, however, our task to “save every species.” That is a cosmic piety, not a Christian piety. We do not know enough nor can we assume that the current earthly conditions are optimal. They probably are optimal for today, but we should not assume that they’ll be optimal ten or twenty years in the future. This, however, is not a warrant for any *laissez-faire* attitude. The environment is constantly changing and conditions right now will not be the conditions of a year from now.

How is it that the proponents of evolution do not understand that the environment is in constant and sometimes radical change. Some species may be viable for only a brief span of time. To try to save a species is an attempt to deny change.

It does not seem likely that we shall accomplish as much by fiat - by the draconian laws proposed by E. O. Wilson, Paul Ehrlich, Peter Raven and their companions -- as we will by a full Christian vision of creation in Christ. We should be teaching the vision of Athanasius:

Like a musician who has attuned his lyre, and by the artistic blending of low and high and medium tones produces a single melody, so the Wisdom of God, holding the universe like a lyre, adapting things heavenly to things earthly, and earthly things to heavenly, harmonizes them all, and, leading them by His will, makes one world and one world-order in beauty and harmony (*Contra Gentes*, 41, p. 26.)

This will have more power to “save” than all the mandates of the anti-human wing of the environmental movement combined. The Church must promote an awareness of the unity of creation, while standing athwart all efforts to promote “environmental sanity” at the price of human freedom. Freedom is God’s greatest gift to his creation, including, in the Final Kingdom, the nonhuman world. Any “sanity” purchased at the price of true human freedom -- which includes sinful and stupid behavior - is really Christian “insanity.”

Over a hundred years ago a Protestant theologian, Horace Bushnell, remarked that power follows the direction of hope. We who have Christ -- who are Christ in the Church in history -- must preach and live the hope that is Christ’s presence to us in the Church.

Covenantal freedom demands that we learn all there is to learn about our world, to foster the health of the creation in Christ, to co-create in Christ the creation that fulfills God’s designs for it. This is a primary duty of the Christian, one that we cannot abdicate, cannot leave to the “pagans” to achieve. Creation can find its full destiny only in Christ -- and we in the Church are the Christ-bearers in the world today. It is we who must give the world the hope that is Christ.

We cannot do this in ignorance or in greed. It is important for us to learn as best we can ? using all the scientific and humanistic tools we can acquire -- to know and appreciate and love “this world.” Almost every data set we get in astronomy and astrophysics reminds us of how little we know. This is true also of the biosphere. We are essentially ignorant of the profound complexity (and beauty) of the biosphere. It is incumbent on all of us to learn as much as we can and do as much as we can to promote “environmental sanity”-- as a true religious duty. All that exists, insofar as it exists, is revelatory of God; it tells us the “complexity” of God, which, when finally understood, is clearly seen as the “simplicity” of God. The sheer number of things “out there” and “in here” bespeaks of the “multiplicity “and prodigality of God who is One. The order in the universe speaks of the love of God for us. It is all beautiful and it is all gift.

We have a duty as Christians to learn about and love the physical world as-it-is. In fulfilling this task, we must always remember that we are Christ’s surrogates in this world. We are literally, in virtue of our baptism and confirming in the Spirit, other Christs. We are responsible for the health and vitality of the world -- to a point. That responsibility does not extend to every species and to every possibility. God is primarily responsible for all that is. All we can do is the best that we can. Doing more is arrogance; it is anthropocentrism run wild. Many, if not most, things are God’s responsibility. He can take care of their longevity, since we cannot.

QUESTIONS

What is the virtue of hope? On what basis can we have hope in view of the environmental “crisis.”

What is “covenantal freedom”?

If creation can find its destiny only in Christ, how does that mandate the Christian to “be in Christ”, to “act in Christ”, to “love in Christ”? What does it mean sacramentally “to be in Christ”? What did the Fathers of the Church mean by ‘participation’ in Christ? Does that mean that if we are in union with Christ we will know with his knowledge and love with his love?

We are called to be other Christs; we have that as a mission and as a duty. How can we carry it out except with his grace, with his love?

Readings II in Faith and Science		
ID	Article Title	Author
BK023-001	Table of Contents	
BK023-002	Foreword	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-003	Campus Ministry Involvement	Father Vincent E. Krische
BK023-004	A History of Science and Faith	Father William A. Wallace, OP
BK023-005	Letter of Pope John Paul II	
BK023-006	The Church & Scientists: 1977 Synod of Bishops	
BK023-007	Religion and Science: Must There Be A Conflict?	Father William A. Wallace, OP
BK023-008	The Christian Notion of Freedom	Bishop John Sheets, SJ
BK023-009	The Worldview of Genesis 1-11	Reverend Hugh Beck
BK023-010	Contemporary Biotechnology in The Context of Conflicting Theological Perspectives	Donald Demarco, PhD
BK023-011	What is Science? What is Theology?	Sister Carla Mae Streeter, OP
BK023-012	Science/Religion Not on Speaking Terms in Today's World	David Byers, PhD
BK023-013	Neutrality or Alliance	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-014	Apostleship	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-015	Science Versus Religion: A Conflict of Ideas or a Clash of Wills	Richard Blackwell, PhD
BK023-016	Some Elements of the Faith/Science Apostolate	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-017	Some Historical Items	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-018	And I Will Make You Fishers of Men...	Evelyn Crump, PhD
BK023-019	The Spirituality of The Scientist	Evelyn Crump, PhD
BK023-020	An Intellectual Gap	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-021	Literalness	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-022	Praise	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-023	The Theological Task	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-024	History and Myth: The Inquisition	Robert P. Lockwood
BK023-025	Galileo and The Catholic Church	Robert P. Lockwood
BK023-026	When Faith and Reason Clash: Evolution and The Bible	Alvin Plantinga, PhD
BK023-027	Christianity and Modern Science	Rudolf Brun, PhD
BK023-028	Reflections on the Mission of a Catholic Scientist	Lucien Morren, PhD
BK023-029	Sociology	William Monahan, PhD
BK023-030	Truth for an Artist	Leonard Buckley
BK023-031	Issues of Concern	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-032	Environment and the Believer	Father Albert Fritsch, SJ
BK023-033	What Kind of Salvation?	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-034	Some Environmental Issues	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-035	The Freelands Project	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-036	Altered Perception	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-037	Theologians Visit the Environment	John Kinney, PE, DEE
BK023-038	Consumption of Natural Resources	Gregory Pouch, PhD
BK023-039	Reproductive Biology	Allyson Chavez Larkin, MD
BK023-040	Holistic Sexuality: A Proper Focus for the Scientist	Hanna Klaus, MD, FACOG
BK023-041	Sociobiology: The New Religion	Richard Blackwell, PhD
BK023-042	Animal Research	Father Robert Brungs, SJ

BK023-043	Patenting of Biological Materials	David Saliwanchik, Esq.
BK023-044	The Inner Environment	Robert Z. Greenley, PhD
BK023-045	What are the Possibilities of Human Cloning?	Robert Collier, PhD
BK023-046	Cloning	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-047	Human Embryonic Stem Cell Research Ethics in The Face Of Uncertainty	Father Kevin Fitzgerald, SJ
BK023-048	Time: The Falsest God Of All	Thomas Sheahen, PhD
BK023-049	Six Magic Numbers in Physics	Thomas Sheahen, PhD
BK023-050	On The Domestication Of Science	John Matschiner, PhD
BK023-051	Chance/Chaos Versus A Planned Design in The Universe: Pointers To God?	Robert Z. Greenley, PhD
BK023-052	Nuclear Waste	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-053	Seeming Discovery On Mars	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-054	The Information Superhighway	Bishop Mark Hurley
BK023-055	Is Secular Education Adequate for the Pursuit of Truth in Science?	Robert Z. Greenley, PhD