



Readings II in Faith & Science

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The Freelands Project

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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

The Freelands Project

[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.]

A June 25, 1993 issue of *Science* carried an article reporting on the June 11, 1993 meeting of the Society for Conservation Biology at Arizona State University, The title of the meeting was Wildlands Project. *Science* summed up the meeting in the following terms:

Designed to protect biodiversity in North America, the project calls for a network of wilderness reserves, human buffer zones, and wildlife corridors stretching across huge tracts of land -- hundreds of millions of acres, as much as half the continent. . . .

In fact, the long term goal of the Wildlands Project is nothing less than a transformation of America from a place where 4.7% of the land is wilderness to an archipelago of human-inhabited islands surrounded by natural areas. It is, said Reed F. Noss, one of the plan's architects and the editor of the journal *Conservation Biology*, "a vision of what the continent might look like in 200 years if we can reduce the scale of human activities."

The whole project is a logical extension of the principles behind the issue of the spotted owl in the forests of Oregon and Washington. There is a growing acceptance of the notion that wild animals, especially animals like wolves, grizzly bears and the like, need enormous chunks of land in which to roam. Only then can they be happy. That principle leads to a conviction among "conservation biologists" that human activity fragments the wild habitat. Thus, human activity must be curtailed to maintain biodiversity.

The proponents of a radical reorientation of human activity feel that conservation activities of the past -- game preserves, national parks, etc. -- were more concerned with esthetics than with biological considerations. Wildlife refuges, for example, were set up to protect a single species like ducks or the whooping crane.

The Project's basic design is the reversal of habitat fragmentation. As such, it postulates three basic components: core reserves, buffer or multiple-use zones and connecting corridors. The biology involved in designating these areas is complex. A lot of it is conjectural. All of it is anthropocentric insofar as it is a human estimate of what animal populations need and "want." Biologist [Mark Schaffer, vice president for resource planning at the Wilderness Society] states: "Unfortunately, a lot of (population viability analyses) aren't very good at all. The life characteristics of fewer than a dozen are known well enough to be used in these models. . . . I don't think anyone has looked at PVAs (population viability analysis), seen the kind of data they require, and then gathered it -- still less directly tested one."

Another scientist [Park Service ecologist Craig L. Shafer] thinks that in practice this is a minor quibble. He is sure that for large mammals we'll need multi-million-acre reserves. That, of course, will not be enough. All the reserves will have boundaries that the animals will not know about. Worse, these edges (things like roads) act as avenues for the invasion of other species and poachers (referred to by one ecologist as Bubba).

Buffers, then, would be areas of transition between the wilderness ("pure nature") and human-dominated areas. No matter how stringently the human population is regulated, we can't prevent animals from breaching the

buffer zones. This is a totally untried and untested notion. Lynn Maguire of the Duke University School of the Environment states:

I don't think parents in this country will be thrilled if they had to pack a pistol when they watched their children in the back yard. People do that in Alaska and it's damned inconvenient.

Some buffers will be needed, Maguire agrees, but nobody knows how to design them. Because half of the buffer equation is the behavior of animals, it is a question of whether buffers can be created at all. But reserves and buffers would not be enough. According to the Wildlands Projects we would also need corridors. The *Science* report states:

Corridors represent even more of an unknown than do buffers, leading some biologists to question their value. Like roadways between cities, corridors are intended to provide nonhumans with a transportation network. If a species goes extinct in one area, corridors may enable members from nearby patches to recolonize the empty space. Linking small populations, they could facilitate the genetic mixing that prevents inbreeding.

All this depends on whether animals in nature will *use* corridors. Even supporters of the concept admit there is a paucity of evidence. At a recent conference devoted to corridors, only five of 36 papers presented empirical data on their use; three showed that animals rarely traverse them. Still, relatively little use may be enough.

The costs, economic, social and political -- and religious -- will be enormous, probably too great for this to become reality in the immediate future. Even with the cost, though, this project appeals to many, including environmentalists, animal rights groups and some political operatives. The appeal, I think, is superficial. It attracts scientific elitists like E. O. Wilson, Paul Ehrlich and Michael Soulé. It will appeal to celebrities like Barbra Streisand and Robert Redford and probably Al Gore. It will attract theorists like Thomas Berry and Matthew Fox, each of whom has a wide audience among professional religionists. This project reminds me of Rousseau's noble savage and James Fenimore Cooper's "virtuous wilderness."

This project makes good points in the name of stewardship while at the same denying stewardship on a level higher than romanticism. Remember: "Give me a home where the buffalo roam, where the deer and the antelope play"? If the Wildlands Projects is vigorously pursued, the buffalo will roam, the deer and the antelope play, but we won't have a home on the range.

This is a radical proposal. The project reverses thousands of years of social, cultural, political and religious thinking. We should consider each aspect carefully. The social and cultural effects may be the most apparent and are probably the easiest to consider.

For thousands of years -- since human beings began to gather in villages, towns and eventually cities -- our effort has been turned to domesticating the earth. Forests were cleared, crops planted, wild animals subdued. The force and direction of human technological genius was ordered to "subduing and conquering the world," to turning an environment into a human world.

We did it well at times, poorly at others, and disastrously every now and again. Yet, the overall effort made life easier and, we thought, better. There were intellectual attempts (some more intellectual than others) to turn back the technological clock or to glorify the "purity" of the wilderness or the "virtue" of the noble savage. We need only recall Rousseau or Goethe or that always popular American writer, James Fenimore Cooper. Let me quote a small section from *The Leatherstocking Tales* to remind you of the genre:

In a word, the hand of man has never yet defaced or deformed any part of this native scene, which lay bathed in the sunlight, a glorious picture of affluent forest grandeur, softened by the balminess of June and relieved by the beautiful variety afforded by the presence of so great an expanse of water.

“The hand of man” has defaced the pristine wilderness, but, then, so did herds of millions of buffalo. We can all imagine the sanitation problems resulting from the overnight pause of five million buffalo.

Nonetheless, I suspect only a few would say that the net impact of technology has been all bad. Even the most rabid environmentalists have traveled on airplanes. I still remember a scene at the U.N. Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972. An American from a nearby commune (appropriately named the Pig Farm) was inveighing against all technology. An Englishman (almost a stereotype, complete with an umbrella) asked him if he had gotten to Sweden by walking on the water. I mention this simply to stress that, if we de-domesticate North America, our “standard of living” will change drastically.

The Freelands Project, which began life as the Wildlands Project, calls for a significant abandonment of “civilizing” tendencies that have predominated in the West for thousands of years. It demands a new ethos. It is far more revolutionary than the Romanticism of the late 18th and early 19th century, more revolutionary than the ideas of people like Rousseau. Probably, such revolutionary thinking could arise only in a very highly industrialized nation. Even there, it is questionable whether or not it will ever work.

Nonetheless, this idea has the enthusiastic backing of Paul Ehrlich and E. O. Wilson. We can expect it to claim equally enthusiastic support from the Radical Greens as well as the animal rights groups. It is almost certain to appeal to the mind of environmental bureaucrats. I am confident that our governmental environmentalists (perhaps now and then including the White House) will end up supporting it if it becomes clear that influential environmentalists are backing it.

I also expect that many of the churches (especially those who still disseminate the environmental speech supposedly written by Chief Seattle, but actually written about 20 years ago by a professor named Ted Perry) will support the Freelands Project. The trendier among the church bureaucrats are easily led into “greener pastures.”

It’s not inaccurate to say that this is political dynamite. The spotted owl debate in the Northwest was a minor skirmish compared to the Freelands Project. It’s not hard to imagine the political upheaval this project portends, even if stretched out over decades. *Science* says:

. . . . But critics of the project say that if the science points to costs that are so enormous, plants and animals will become parts of an “us-versus-them” battle in which they don’t stand much of a chance. . . . “I can tell you, from having watched this issue for some time, the people who would be impacted by such reserves are absolutely terrified by them,” says Dave Redmond, press secretary to Representative Bob Smith, an Oregon Republican who has introduced legislation to scale back the Endangered Species Act. “Shutting down broad swathes of the United States -- politically that is just undoable.” If something like the Freelands Project is what it will take to preserve biodiversity, Redmond says, then some biodiversity will have to go. “That,” he says, “is what we’re facing.”

Years ago the cultural, economic and political fallout of something like the Freelands Project would guarantee its lack of viability. Now, however, having seen movements -- radical feminism, complete privatization of life and its attendant (unavoidable) growth in neo-puritanical tyranny, political correctness -- we should be less ready to declare something like the Freelands Project stillborn. If it moves forward at the hands of government -- the only way it will move forward --it will become a tyrannical juggernaut.

It will assume the political coerciveness of the Environmental Protection Agency, the Wetlands Project, the Endangered Species Act or the Delaney Amendment regulating carcinogenic materials. Almost all of these agencies, projects or guidelines are directed, carried out or followed in an almost totally inflexible way.

This project can have devastating effects on humans and may paradoxically have devastating effects on wildlife, on “fierceness” and on wilderness. Furthermore, there is an elitism in this proposal that denigrates the “non-believer.” In the Science article several environmentalists talk about “Bubba” and his gun and six-pack. Many

hunters and fishermen are slobs; so are many environmentalists. All of us at some time or other have (or will) behave like slobs. I suspect that “slobbery” is as prevalent as sinfulness -- maybe is a result of it.

I fear this project because of a growing tyranny around us. As the theologian John Courtney Murray said 40 years ago, as laws proliferate and become more intrusive they also become more ineffective. This will lead away from freedom into coercive governing. We heirs of the representative governance of medieval monasticism and American ideas of freedom should recognize our drift into authoritarianism and try to counter it.

There is also the question of Christian “stewardship.” The Freelands Project raises questions of God’s will for his creation that vitally concern the Church. This project offers a splendid opportunity to review and develop our notions of “cosmic progress” as we (the whole universe) move toward the New Jerusalem. We should use this opportunity to consider, re-consider and re-reconsider the implications of a biologically-based concept of Progress rather than an anthropologically-based one. We must develop our understanding of creation.

Along with the Human Genome Project in the United States and Europe (or the rice genome project in China and Japan) our understanding of creation will become one of the more important doctrinal issues of the rest of this century/millennium. There are staggering religious implications which will impact our understanding of our place as humans in God’s will for his creation.

The environmental community is not monolithic in its basic assumptions. In terms of the Freelands Project, we’d find a spectrum of basic assumptions behind this radically new proposal for human living. Some would feel that it is to our benefit to have as much as half the continent in wilderness. Others feel that animals are every bit as “good” as human beings and have a “right” to an almost limitless area for roaming about. There are degrees of opinions in between. As Christians, we must articulate our assumptions before we can come to grips with this seemingly anti-Christian proposal.

Some in the “creation theology” movement will find this proposal unexceptional -- something to be embraced. I don’t know what the “goddess” people will think, but I suspect that they would accept it as a manifestation of their idea of “Mother Earth.” What, however, will traditional theology do with it?

Christianity is a human-centered and human-directed religion. It is not a “religion of the wilderness.” Historically, and I think doctrinally as well, it is a city-centered religion. We should recall here that “pagani” (not a positive reference in Christianity) referred to the country dwellers. Taking that in its historical setting, it referred to those who lived outside the civilized and civilizing reach of the urban area. Christianity, as far as I know, is the only major religion in the world founded in a city. The other major religions have a far greater right to be known as “religions of the wilderness.”

Christ was born just beyond a town. Much of his apostolic life was spent in the towns of Israel. His life was lived with reference to the Temple of Jerusalem and he died just outside Jerusalem. His birth and death were connected with human settlements. His occupation was one designed to make the earth more habitable for humans. We have no evidence of an attitude toward nature far different from that of his contemporaries.

Certainly his followers -- at least the ones mentioned in Scripture -- were “urbanites,” preaching in the cities and traveling between them. There is a virtual absence of “desert experience” in the New Testament. Though the Jewish Scriptures open in a Garden, the thrust of Jewish experience over the centuries was more and more toward urban experience.

In the Christian Scriptures the final Kingdom is described in terms of the City, not a Garden. This “proves” nothing, but it is influential in directing our unspoken understanding of the world. Even the monks who lived in the wilderness during the Dark Ages were basically intent on the Christian civilizing of their surroundings. Partly as a result, there is now no wilderness to speak of in Europe.

We should review the anthropocentric nature of Christianity. This is not said in order to throw it away and return to a kind of sophisticated animism. I know of nothing in Scripture or Tradition that would warrant Christianity's being anything other than anthropocentric. Furthermore, those proposing equal rights for animals are just as anthropocentric. They think as humans, not as animals. They approach problems as humans, not as animals. Most would react as humans were they attacked by animals. Nonetheless, we can learn much of a positive nature from a serious reevaluation of our basic human-centered faith.

I recently attended a lecture, the title of which was "Can there be another Galileo Case?". Yes, there can, the lecturer suggested. He then said he thought it would come when scientists presented the Church with a completely empirical explanation of the workings of the human mind. He may be right, but I expect it will come with environmentalism, especially in its ramifications on coerced population control. It won't be an exact copy of the Galileo case simply because the Church is nowhere nearly as dominant a cultural force as it was in Italy about 350 years ago. But it certainly will be a "conflict" between faith and science. And, I believe, it will be "bloody."

I am not sure why the Church fails to see the fundamental nature of what is happening in some areas of science and of environmentalism. I don't believe it's enough to say that Christians want to "be with it." Clearly, some Christians have a real desire to be just that, but probably not enough to make this the real reason. I cannot prove it, but I think that one of the most significant reasons is a lack of understanding of what Christianity is about, what its fundamental ethos is. Moreover, I think our more recent (say 500 years) theology is simply not at home in treating such issues.

Whatever the reason, we should be much more critical in our analysis of things like animal rights and great political movements like "environmentalism." They are not simply attempts to work out Aldo Leopold's land ethic. They are tendentious movements that have progressed far beyond his much more modest attempt. I urge you to look with some caution on the "movements" of our times simply because many of them carry radically anti-Christian thoughts and motives. The Freelands Project, I believe, is one of these. So is the international population effort.

Advances in science and technology as well as the kind of problems raised by things like the Freelands Project and the Cairo, Copenhagen and Beijing meetings on population put on by the United Nations provide an opportunity for us to examine our Tradition, to learn from it and from the science of our day. Is our Faith too human-centered? The tendency of Christians, I'm afraid, is to "angelize" the Faith rather than "animalize" it. Is "angelization" also a problem for environmental science, for reproductive science and for science in general? Does science, in fact, lead us to think that we're really "ghosts in the machine."

Pope John Paul II has said:

. . . . science develops best when its concepts and conclusions are integrated into the broader human culture and its concerns for ultimate meaning and value. Scientists cannot, therefore, hold themselves entirely aloof from the sorts of issues dealt with by philosophers and theologians. By devoting to these issues something of the energy and care they give to their research in science, they can help others realize more fully the human potentialities of their discoveries. They can also come to appreciate for themselves that these discoveries cannot be a genuine substitute for knowledge of the truly ultimate. Science can purify religion from error and superstition; religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes. Each can draw the other into a wider world . . . in which both can flourish.

We continually need *purification* of our theology and of our belief. It is clear from our theological history that we can go astray. Science, too, overruns its natural bounds, at times extrapolating far beyond its data. Science is becoming further removed from experimental verification, especially in treating complex systems. That is a topic for another time, one, however, worth serious thought. Both theology and science continually need the purification that the other can help provide. As the Pope states further on:

For the truth of the matter is that the Church and the scientific community will inevitably interact; their options do not include isolation. Christians will inevitably assimilate the prevailing ideas about the world,

and today these are deeply shaped by science. The only question is whether they will do this critically or unreflectively, with depth and nuance or with a shallowness that debases the Gospel and leaves us ashamed before history. Scientists, like all human beings, will make decisions upon what ultimately gives meaning and value to their lives and to their work. This they will do well or poorly, with the reflective depth that theological wisdom can help them attain, or with an unconsidered absolutizing of their results beyond their reasonable and proper limits.

We should work together with those proposing things like the Freelands Project, to force them and ourselves to examine basic assumptions. All scientific advance and proposals like the Freelands Project must be dealt with in total honesty, with an openness to developing our appreciation of the non-human creation. It can help us deal open-mindedly with God's will expressed in the Church. It is an opportunity for us to develop our understanding of God's purpose in creation and redemption - particularly in redemption.

St. Paul tells us in the hymn in Colossians that creation is in Christ. If creation is in Christ, all creation is graced from the beginning. "To be in Christ" is to be graced - and vice versa. This indicates that God is interested in creation, in what we do with it and what we do for it. We must, individually and communally, be interested in what we do with and/or for creation, in our manner of living and in our "civilizing" attempts.

Why are we the summit of creation? Why do even angels learn the mysteries of God's will in and through the Church? What does this imply about our ability to "rule" creation and lead it back to God? What a serious and mysterious obligation! What a vocation! What a destiny! The earth is ours; but even more, it is God's. In faith and in hope we can return it to him in love - in the spirit of the parable of the talents. Having been given an environment, we can return a world.

Can there be a long-term, serious dialogue between the promoters of the Freelands Project and Christian thinkers in which basic assumptions and beliefs are honestly aired, considered and respected? Can some sort of agreement come on issues like "offending nature" and "offending God by the misuse of nature." This really asks in a specific way whether there can be honest discussion between those who very definitely believe in God and in God's providence and those who may not believe in either? Is there a chance for some concord on an issue like Freelands? I suppose the only answer is to try it and see if it's possible. I certainly would promote the attempt to dialogue. As was said earlier, the development of Christian thought demands that we look seriously at what is being attempted here.

In a recent article, "A Field Guide to Pluralism in Environmental Ethics," Dr. John Nolt, quoting Aldo Leopold, notes: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." Nolt then adds:

With this proclamation Aldo Leopold launched environmental ethics - against a tide of humanistic individualism that had been flowing since the Renaissance. . . . But he really didn't mean what he said. The integrity, stability and beauty of many a biotic community would best be served by the decimation of its human populations; yet Leopold drew no misanthropic conclusions. His land ethic was designed to ameliorate, not replace, humanistic doctrines of land use (by which he meant, not merely rocks and soil, but also the cyclical dance of water, air, light, and life ? in short, whole ecosystems) into the moral community, without expatriating its human citizens.

This is part of the argument that will develop out of the Freelands Project. People like Leopold wanted to ameliorate the evils of the laissez faire attitude to the environment. To think that Leopold's ethic still dominates the "more worldly part" of the environmental movement is false. People like Leopold are no longer important, although lip service made be paid to their contributions to the evolving crusade. Do the theorists of the environmental movement really believe that the integrity, stability and beauty of many a biotic community would best be served by the decimation of its human populations? Yes, indeed! And it is here that any dialogue with the Christian faith must begin.

Consider what Nolt calls moral *pluralism*:

Moral pluralism, as I use that term, is the notion that there are several mutually incommensurable kinds of moral value. (This is essentially the definition of John Kekes in “Pluralism and Conflict in Morality”, *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 26, 1, pp. 37-50). The integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community might . . . be . . . the happiness of sentient beings . . . , the autonomy of persons another still. None of these goods is reducible to the others, according to the pluralist, nor are they all reducible to something else. Moreover they are mutually incommensurable; that is, there is no canonical way of ranking or comparing them. Thus to conflicts among these values pluralism offers no unambiguous resolution. The notion of a plurality of mutually incommensurable values is not, of course, unique to environmental ethics. But because Leopold and his successor have wanted to transcend humanistic individualism and yet give it its due, they have felt the pluralistic urge especially acutely.

As Nolt had pointed out earlier in this article:

Yet it is not easy to graft an ethic that finds intrinsic value in, among other things, *nonhuman* wholes onto a tradition that has conceived moral worth in terms of happiness, virtue or rationality: terms that apply exclusively to *human* -- or at a minimum, sentient -- *individuals*. “Optimists may still hope to reconcile non-humanistic holism with humanistic individualism by locating some deep root from which they both spring. But many less sanguine thinkers have concluded, most with some reluctance, that the tension between them is irresolvable, and that if we want an environmental ethic we had better to learn to live with it.

The *irresolvable*, I think, will certainly be found in the working out of the Freelands Project. In the meantime, we should not discount it. There is no question of the failure of the *laissez faire* attitudes toward the environment contained in a “Renaissance individualism.” All we have to do is look around at the mess we have made around the world. We have quite literally exploited the environment and we have been wrong in doing it. We Christians have mostly acquiesced in it, if, indeed, we did not help it along.

Part of the mess we’ve made is the state of our ethical discourse. Nothing will be said about that here beyond noting that values-language is not far from Nolt’s definition of moral pluralism. There are as many “values” and “values-sets” as there are people. The dictionary definition of “values” should be enough to affirm this statement. It would be a good exercise to look up this word in the dictionary and compare it to the definition of “virtue.” Once, the U.S. had a standard of public decency, a “public philosophy” or a “public consensus.” This has not been true for the last 30 or 35 years. When was the last time we were able to come together *as a nation* for some cause? Can we come together on such a radical proposition as the Freelands Project?

While we must feel some guilt for our part in this exploitation (and do our best to make amends for it), we should not let guilt blind us to the radical nature of the moral (and doctrinal) challenge that the environmental movement theorists present to the Church.

QUESTIONS

What is the difference between a biologically based concept of Progress and justice and an anthropologically based one? Are both, though almost contrary in effect, anthropocentric? It isn’t as if the rattlesnakes called a conference and put out a biologically based position paper. All of this position (The Freelands Project) was written by fallible humans.

Humans have quite actively pursued the “domestication” of the planet for at least 10,000 years. Is this pursuit all wrong? Do the “rights” of animals come before the rights of humans? Is the Freelands Project just the expression of a biological “wouldn’t it be nice if . . .” kind of a desire or is it a prescription for the future? Can it be that we have “civilized” the world as much as we can and we have to go back to “wilderness” to “save our souls”?

Christianity is historically a human-centered faith. It began and grew in an urban setting without much of a desert experience. Has that corrupted it? It looks for the betterment of humans by configuring them to Christ. All the rest of creation will follow when women and men begin to act more and more like Christ. How successful has the Church been in promoting this kind of thinking and behavior? Christianity sees the rest of creation saved in and through the human? It does not see the salvation of animals and things as equal to the salvation of the human. Is this an environmentally sound position?

Is population growth the trigger for an all-out assault on nature? Or is the notion that the U.S. way of life is the model for all the people now living and the more to follow? These are not the same thing. Which one represents the more urgent one?

How do the most recent demographic projections of an aging (and declining) world population fit into the “population growth” scenario. Both cannot be true.

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