

**ANTICIPATING THE NEW CREATION:
FOUNDATIONAL CONVICTIONS AND HISTORICAL LIMITATIONS
OF JOHN WESLEY’S ECOTHEOLOGY¹**

Randy L. Maddox

The publication of *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson in 1962² is broadly used to mark the awakening of public concern in the United States about the growing impact of human population growth and technology upon the earth’s environment. Carson highlighted how this impact was threatening extinction of some species and posed a threat to the future survival of humanity. This warning bell was followed five years later by an essay on “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”³ that would prove almost as influential. In this essay Lynn White Jr. argued that a major contributor to the high rate of detrimental impact upon the environment by Western societies (and the relative lack of concern about this impact) was the anthropocentric Christian worldview that had long dominated Western culture.

In the forty-five years since Carson’s wake-up call there has been growing public debate about the possibility and implications of a looming environmental crisis. This debate has been marked by predictable resistance, given the financial implications both of acknowledging culpability and of undertaking the changes in business practices and in personal lifestyle that

¹This lecture is adapted from “Anticipating the New Creation: Wesleyan Foundations for Holistic Mission.” *Asbury Journal* 62 (2007): 49–66. Citations should draw on the published version.

²Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

³Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155 (1967): 1203–7; reprinted in a number of later settings.

would be necessary to reduce significantly our impact upon the environment. Some of the resistance came in the form of challenges to the scientific data and models used in assessing the potential of the threat. Others insisted that technological fixes for any damage being done would be developed, if we simply let the market run its course. While echoes of both of these strategies remain, the last few years have witnessed a solidifying consensus in Western societies that the harmful impact of human activity upon the environment is real, and that efforts to mitigate this impact and to restore some of the prior damage must become priorities in our political and economic agendas.

Some of the lingering resistance to this increasing consensus is articulated in Christian terms, particularly in evangelical Protestant settings.⁴ In general, however, the major Christian communities have taken a lead role over the last thirty years in stressing the need to address environmental issues.⁵ Even in the evangelical arena a significant coalition has emerged that embraces the mission of protecting and healing the natural environment.⁶

But this brings us back to the Lynn White essay. How are we to relate current Christian environmental advocacy with his claim about the negative influence of the traditional Christian worldview? The first thing to say is that the present advocacy does not directly refute White's

⁴Cf. Richard T. Wright, "Tearing Down the Green: Environmental Backlash in the Evangelical Sub-Culture," *Perspectives of Science and Christian Faith* 47 (1995): 80–91; E. Calvin Biesner, *Where Garden Meets Wilderness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); and Robert Royal, *The Virgin and the Dynamo: Use and Abuse of Religion in Environmental Debates* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

⁵See Joseph K. Sheldon, *Rediscovery of Creation: A Bibliographical Study of the Church's Response to the Environmental Crisis* (Metuchen, NY: Scarecrow, 1992); and Roger S. Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁶See particularly the Evangelical Environmental Network, with its "Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation" (<http://www.creationcare.org/resources/declaration.php>); and a parallel group in Britain, the John Ray Initiative (<http://www.jri.org.uk/>).

thesis. White, the son of a Presbyterian minister, was not issuing a blanket indictment of biblical teaching or Christian tradition.⁷ He was contending that a particular way of reading Genesis 1–3, prominent in the Latin-speaking Western church, had served to encourage the assumption that the rest of nature was to be valued solely in terms of its contribution to human flourishing—and that humans should seek to control the rest of nature, extracting from it whatever they desired. When his essay turned from diagnosis to prescription, one of White’s recommendations was for Western Christians to reclaim Saint Francis of Assisi’s alternative sense of biblical teaching, which emphasized the kinship of humanity with the rest of nature. The growing support among Christian communities over the last few decades for addressing environmental issues has been fostered in part by precisely such attention to alternative voices within the Christian tradition.⁸

This allowed, there were major weaknesses in White’s analysis. Indeed, the most enduring contribution of the essay has been the extensive scholarly debate that it sparked. This debate has challenged or added significant nuance to much of White’s historical analysis of developments in medieval and early modern Western society.⁹ It has made clear that reading Genesis 1–3 with an emphasis on human dominion over the rest of creation was uncommon before the seventeenth century, and used in ambivalent ways when it did become common (more

⁷This point is even clearer in Lynn White Jr., “Continuing the Conversation,” in *Western Man and Environmental Ethics: Attitudes toward Nature and Technology*, edited by Ian Barbour (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1973), 55–64.

⁸Cf. Dieter T. Hessel & Rosemary Ruether, eds., *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); and R. J. Berry, ed., *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2006).

⁹Cf. David Livingstone, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis: A Reassessment,” *Fides et Historia* 26 (1994): 38–55; and Elspeth Whitney, “Christianity and Changing Concepts of Nature: An Historical Perspective,” in *Religion and the New Ecology*, edited by David Lodge & Christopher Hamlin (University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 26–52.

on this later).¹⁰ It has spawned a wealth of exegetical studies that challenge the anthropocentric reading of Genesis 1–3 and sketch out the broader biblical teachings about God valuing the whole of creation.¹¹ Finally, it has deepened awareness of the ambiguity of Christian tradition concerning the relationship of humanity to the natural world—acknowledging the spiritualizing tendencies that have encouraged neglect and disdain for the rest of creation, while increasing awareness of a counterbalancing strand running through the history of the church that celebrates God’s presence in, with, and under the created order.¹²

A larger fruit of this focused debate over Lynn White’s thesis is the growing number of constructive attempts to articulate the environmental implications of core Christian doctrines.¹³ These studies suggest that the voices counterbalancing the spiritualizing tendencies in tradition were not idiosyncratic figures; rather, they were insightful witnesses to central convictions of Christian life and mission. By implication, the current Christian emphasis on environmental issues should not be dismissed as mere pandering to contemporary culture. The present essay seeks to make this point with a focus on the Wesleyan tradition.

¹⁰See, in particular, Jeremy Cohen, *“Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It”*: *The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); and Peter Harrison, “Subduing the Earth: Genesis 1, Early Modern Science, and the Exploitation of Nature,” *Journal of Religion* 79 (1999): 86–109.

¹¹To sample this work, see Ellen Bernstein, *The Splendor of Creation: A Biblical Ecology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005); Norman C. Habel, ed., *Readings from the Perspective of Earth* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); and the *Earth Story* series, edited by Habel & Wurst (Sheffield Academic Press, 2000–01).

¹²A formative work in this regard was H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

¹³For a few recent examples, see Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001); Sigurd Bergmann, *Creation Set Free: The Spirit as Liberator of Nature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); Ernst M. Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005); and Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006).

Foundational Convictions of Wesley's Ecotheology

My first task is to place John Wesley solidly among those voices that help counterbalance the tendencies in Christian tradition to limit God's salvific concern merely to humanity (and even more narrowly, to human "souls" alone). While there is some ambiguity in Wesley on this point, emphasis on the holistic scope of God's salvific mission emerged clearly in his mature writings.¹⁴ Careful consideration of these writings reveal that this emphasis on God's care for the whole of creation—and our calling to participate in this care—was not a tangential matter for Wesley; it grew out of some of his most central intellectual and theological convictions.¹⁵

Creation Permeated with the Presence of God

One way to organize the convictions that undergirded Wesley's mature emphasis on holistic mission is as alternatives to the typical charges made against the compatibility of the Christian worldview with concern for the environment. The first specific charge that Lynn White laid against Christianity in his essay was that it encouraged the neglect or abuse of nature by following the Bible in denying that any natural objects other than humans are inspirited.¹⁶

¹⁴I have traced the larger trajectory of this emphasis in "Nurturing the New Creation: Reflections on a Wesleyan Trajectory," in *Wesleyan Perspectives on New Creation*, edited by M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2004), 21–52; and "Celebrating the Whole Wesley: A Legacy for Contemporary Wesleyans," *Methodist History* 43.2 (2005): 74–89.

¹⁵For previous reflections on this point see Robert Vincent Rakestraw, "The Contribution of John Wesley Toward An Ethic of Nature," *Drew Gateway* 56.3 (1986): 14–25; John B. Cobb Jr., *Grace and Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 52–55; John Harrod, "Wesleyan Reflections on Ecology," in *Windows on Wesley*, edited by Philip Meadows (Oxford: Applied Theology Press, 1997), 129–52; Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 200–207; and Michael Lodahl, *God Of Nature and of Grace: Reading the World in a Wesleyan Way* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2003).

¹⁶White, "Historical Roots," 1205.

White framed this charge in explicit contrast with pagan animism and the “pantheistic” religions of Asia, which he presented as inherently respectful of all natural objects. It was not long before scholars were pointing out instances of broad environmental neglect and damage in areas dominated by animistic and pantheistic worldviews, challenging the simplistic assumption of their superiority for encouraging humans to care for the natural world.¹⁷ Continuing study has led to recognition of significant support for environmental concern within most religious worldviews, while highlighting the ambiguous nature of the support in each case.¹⁸ Support is not limited to worldviews that are pan-psychic or that consider nature to be divine. It is sufficient that nature be accepted as sacred—that is, as inherently related to the Divine and as revelatory of the Divine’s presence and activity. Where this is accepted, there are theological grounds for insisting that all natural objects deserve respect and care.

Acknowledging this point, it has become common more recently to connect the tendency in the Western world to neglect or abuse nature with the adoption in the early modern period of the scientific model of Descartes and Newton, which rendered matter totally inert and accounted for motion by imposed mechanical forces.¹⁹ For some this model led to the deistic conclusion that, while the “cosmic clock” was surely dependent upon God for its initial creation, it was not the scene of God’s continuing presence and action. They concluded further that we are left to our

¹⁷See, for example, the reflections on ancient China in Yi-Fu Tuan, “Our Treatment of the Environment in Ideal and Actuality,” *American Scientist* 58 (1970): 244–49.

¹⁸Cf. David Kinsley, *Ecology and Religion: Ecological Spirituality in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1995); Richard C. Foltz, ed., *Worldviews, Religion, and the Environment: A Global Anthology* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson, 2002); and Roger S. Gottlieb, ed., *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2004).

¹⁹A pioneering expression of this argument was Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), esp. pp. 192ff.

own resources in dealing with the machine, free to tinker with or reshape it as we think best.

Wesley's awareness of such possible implications likely explains his hesitations about the mechanical model of nature. His general discomfort with Descartes is evidenced by systematic deletion of references to Descartes from the original text (by Johann Buddeus) that provided the core of Wesley's *Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation*. Wesley's relationship to Newton was more ambiguous.²⁰ He accepted Newton's basic cosmology, but feared that his mechanical explanation of motion suggested deistic conclusions. To protect against this, Wesley verged at times on reducing the laws of nature to mere descriptions of God's regular *direct* causation in the material realm. This is expressed most pointedly in a passage in his *Survey* borrowed from Thomas Morgan:

“But what are the *general laws of nature*?” They are plainly the rules or principles, by which the Governor and Director of all things, has determined to act. Accordingly what we call *mechanism*, is indeed the free agency and continued energy of the author and director of nature. All the necessary motion of bodies therefore, and all the laws and forces whereby it is communicated and preserved, are the continued, regular will; choice and agency of the first cause, and incessant mover and preserver of the universe.²¹

More typically, Wesley adopted the model of God, as First Cause, working through uniform secondary causes. A good example is another reflection on the laws of nature (this time, drawn from Isaac Watts) included in the *Survey*:

Will you suppose that it derogates from the glory of divine providence to represent the great engine of this visible world as moving onward in its appointed course without the continual interposure of [God's] hand? It is granted, indeed,

²⁰See John English, “John Wesley and Isaac Newton's ‘System of the World’,” *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 48 (1991): 69–86.

²¹John Wesley, *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation*, 4th edn. (London: Paramore, 1784), 4:22. Cf. Sermon 26, “Sermon on the Mount VI,” §III.7, in *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984—) 1:581. Note: hereafter referred to simply as *Works*.

that his hand is ever active in preserving all the parts of matter in all their motions, according to these uniform laws; but I think it is rather derogatory to his infinite wisdom to imagine that he would not make the vegetable and animal, as well as the inanimate, world of such sort of workmanship as might regularly move onward in this manner for five or six thousand years, without putting a new hand to it ten thousand times every hour.²²

But Wesley was characteristically quick to offset any potential deistic connotations of this classical model. In the first place, he refused to reduce God's providential activity to solely upholding the order of creation, insisting that God is also active on specific instances in ways that transcend such regular order (i.e., special providence, including miracles).²³ More broadly, he sided with those who found Newton's model of inert matter in empty space unable to account for the motion in the universe, leading them to posit instead an all-pervading aether that served as the secondary cause of all motion. Consider the opening of his introduction to *The Desideratum: or Electricity made Plain and Simple*:

From a thousand experiments it appears that there is a fluid far more subtle than air, which is every where diffused through all space, which surrounds the earth and pervades every part of it. And such is the extreme fineness, velocity and expansiveness of this active principle that all other matter seems to be only the body, and this the soul of the universe. This we might term "elementary fire."²⁴

As this shows, Wesley shared their tendency to equate this aether with fire and (newly discovered) electricity—and even to hint that it was the primal form of the Spirit's energizing presence in the universe.²⁵

²²Wesley, *Survey of the Wisdom of God*, 2:258.

²³See Sermon 67, "On Divine Providence," §§19–26, *Works* 2:543–48.

²⁴Wesley, *The Desideratum: or, Electricity made Plain and Useful* (London: Strahan, 1760), 9.

²⁵For a good discussion of this theme in George Berkeley, John Hutchinson, John Wesley, and others, see G. N. Cantor, "The Theological Significance of Ethers," in *Conceptions of Ether* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 135–55.

Whatever one makes of Wesley's claims scientifically, it is clear that he viewed nature as sacred—that is, as permeated by and revelatory of God's energizing presence. What he defended in apologetic debate, his brother Charles captured in hymnic praise:

- 1 Author of every work divine,
Who dost through both creations shine,
The God of nature and of grace,
Thy glorious steps in all we see,
And wisdom attribute to thee,
And power, and majesty, and praise.
- 2 Thou didst thy mighty wings outspread,
And brooding o'er the chaos, shed
Thy life into th' impregn'd abyss,
The vital principle infuse,
And out of nothing's womb produce
The earth and heaven, and all that is.
- 3 That all-informing breath thou art
Who dost continued life impart,
And bidd'st the world persist to be:
Garnished by thee yon azure sky,
And all those beauteous orbs on high
Depend in golden chains from thee.
- 4 Thou dost create the earth anew,
(Its Maker and Preserver too,)
By thine almighty arm sustain;
Nature *perceives* thy secret force,
And still holds on her even course,
And owns thy providential reign.
- 5 Thou art the Universal Soul,
The plastic power that fills the whole,
And governs earth, air, sea, and sky:
The creatures all thy breath receive,
And who by thy inspiring live,
Without thy inspiration die.²⁶

²⁶Charles Wesley, Hymn 28, sts. 1–5, *Hymns of Petition and Thanksgiving for the Promise of the Father* (Bristol: Farley 1746), 31–32; reprinted in George Osborn, ed., *The Poetical Works of John and*

In their joint testimony the Wesley brothers hover at the very edge of pantheism, so strong is their desire to portray how God’s active presence and power permeate the created order.²⁷

Humanity Embedded in the Chain of Being

Ian McHarg, one of the sharpest critics of the compatibility of the Christian worldview with concern for the environment, takes us a step further in our consideration with his charge that “Christianity tends to assert outrageously the separateness and dominance of man over nature.”²⁸ There are two issues intertwined in this charge. In this section I will consider the first suggestion that the traditional Christian worldview overly separates humanity from nature, thereby reducing nature to a mere “stage” for human life, with no inherent value.

Anyone familiar with Genesis 1–2 will find it outrageous how easily McHarg and others attribute the sharp separation between humanity and nature to these texts. Both accounts place the creation of humanity within the larger creation of the universe, with one emphasizing that “humans” are made from “humus” (*adam* from *adama*)—the same stuff as the rest of creation. Neither suggests that humans popped into a ready-made stage from outside. That said, we must acknowledge that this suggestion does emerge at times in later Christian tradition. Its source is not Scripture but the Platonism embedded in the Greco-Roman setting of early Christianity.

Strong appropriations of the Platonic suggestion that humans are pre-existent souls who have been consigned temporarily to this transient world (as, for example, in Origen) have been

Charles Wesley (London: Wesleyan Methodist Conference Office, 1868–72), 4:198–99.

²⁷This desire is captured well in Lodahl, *God of Nature and of Grace*, Part II (pp. 107–65).

²⁸Ian McHarg, “Our Role in Nature,” in *Environmental Decay in the Historical Context*, edited by R. Detweiler (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman & Co, 1973), 124.

rare in the history of the church. Appropriation of the more subtle neo-Platonic focus on the human being as a “microcosm” of the whole cosmos, with the accompanying assumption that redemption of the “microcosm” can substitute for redemption of the whole cosmos, was much more common. But there was a third influential stream of Greco-Roman culture that offered an alternative to such tendencies to separate humanity from creation: the mix of Aristotelian and neo-Platonic emphases that portrayed the cosmos as a “great chain of being.”²⁹ The central claim of this model was that the type of cosmos fitting for a Perfect Being to produce was one in which every conceivable niche was occupied by its appropriate type of being.

In a major study Clarence Glacken has argued that the modern ecological ideas of the unity of nature and the balance and harmony of nature trace their roots back to this model of the chain of being.³⁰ Glacken identifies Cicero’s *On the Nature of the Gods*, one of Wesley’s favorite classical texts, as the most important ancient synthesis of the model. Turning toward the modern period, Glacken stresses the role of John Ray and Charles Bonnet in adapting the model to frame surveys of the burgeoning knowledge of the natural world. Both of these figures were deeply influential on Wesley. The title and content of his *Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation* echo Ray’s *Wisdom of God manifested in Creation* (1691), and he incorporated an extract on the chain of being from Bonnet’s *Contemplation of Nature* (1764) into the *Survey*.

A quote from his extract of Bonnet can begin to suggest the theological and practical implications of Wesley’s embrace of the chain of being model. In response to the suggestion that

²⁹The classic study of this stream is Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936).

³⁰Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), esp. p. 379.

it would be better if humans were angels, Bonnet counsels:

Confess your error and acknowledge that every being is endued with a perfection suited to the ends of its creation. It would cease to answer that end the very moment it ceased to be what it is. By changing its nature it would change its place and that which it occupied in the universal hierarchy ought still to be the residence of a being resembling it, otherwise harmony would be destroyed. In the assemblage of all the orders of *relative* perfections consists the *absolute* perfection of this whole, concerning which God said “that it was good.”³¹

On these terms, there can be no ideal of humanity separate from the rest of nature! It would be a deprivation of all concerned, and a thwarting of God’s creative will. Humans have a distinctive blend of qualities and a distinctive role, but our true home is within this interwoven chain. To put it in the language of Genesis, we belong in the garden.

The Human Vocation of Modest (and Chastened) Stewardship

If Wesley stands as a counter example to the first half of McHarg’s indictment of the Christian worldview (that we unduly separate humanity from nature), what about the second half of the indictment—that we assert outrageously the dominance of humanity over the rest of nature. The description of the human role in the garden in Genesis 1:28 is the typical text cited in making this charge. I have already pointed to resources that debunk the equation of “dominion” in the Genesis text with “domination” or mistreatment. The biblical language is of a caretaker who “guards and cultivates” the garden (Gen. 2:15).

But for what purpose? Lynn White’s most focused charge in his original essay was that, whatever the biblical text meant originally, it came to be read in a way that justified humans valuing and using the rest of nature solely in terms of how it meets *our* ends. Put sharply,

³¹Wesley, *Survey*, 4:62.

“especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen.”³² It is beyond our purposes to evaluate this comparative claim. What we must admit is that there were strong voices, beginning at least a century before Wesley, that invoked the biblical language of dominion to defend a strong anthropocentric (and proto-capitalist) valuation of nature. A relevant example is William Derham’s insistence that “We can, if need be, ransack the whole globe, ... penetrate into the bowels of the earth, descend to the bottom of the deep, travel to the farthest regions of this world, to acquire wealth, to increase our knowledge, or even only to please our eye or fancy.”³³

Wesley read Derham during his years as a student at Oxford, and includes extracts from Derham in the *Survey*. But he includes nothing, from Derham or elsewhere, that endorses this strong anthropocentric (and proto-capitalist) model of our relationship to nature. Part of the reason is that Wesley imbibed more deeply than Derham the convictions of the “chain of being” model of nature. While this model highlights (as ecologists would today) a range of ways that any particular species might contribute to the well-being of others above or below it in the chain, it also insists that every species has intrinsic value and a right to exist for its own purposes. John Ray, who was deeply shaped by this model, emphasized the relevant implication: “It is a generally received opinion that all this visible world was created for man, that man is the end of creation, as if there were no other end of any creature but some way or other to be serviceable to

³²White, “Historical Roots,” 1205.

³³William Derham, *Physico-Theology* (London: Innys, 1713), 112. For a consideration of alternatives to Derham in his context, see William Coleman, “Providence, Capitalism, and Environmental Degradation: English Apologetics in an Era of Economic Revolution.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37 (1976): 27–44. For a more positive evaluation of Derham, see Robin Attfield, *Environmental Philosophy* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1994), 32–34.

man. ... Yet wise men nowadays think otherwise.”³⁴ While Ray went on to insist that, in this interdependent chain, all species are in some sense serviceable to humanity and we would frustrate the purposes of their creation if we did not make appropriate use of them, he modeled for Wesley a *modest* anthropocentrism.³⁵

Wesley appropriated this model in a way that moved beyond Ray through his distinctive emphasis regarding our role as “stewards.” This emphasis is seen most clearly in his instructions on the use of money, where he criticizes any suggestion that resources put at our disposal are for us to use however we see fit. Wesley insists instead that everything belongs ultimately to God, that it is placed in our care to use as God directs, and that God directs us to use it for the benefit of others once our basic needs are met.³⁶ Extending this principle to the rest of creation, the focus of Wesley’s environmental ethic is better characterized as *theocentric* than anthropocentric. He portrayed the ideal relationship of humanity with creation (modeled by Adam in the Garden of Eden) as one of modest stewardship, where we devote our distinctive gifts to upholding God’s intentions for the balance and flourishing of all creation.³⁷

Most in Wesley’s day shared his assumption of the idyllic nature of the original creation, with peace abounding between all creatures and humans possessing the knowledge to promote the thriving of the whole. They also shared the recognition that this was very unlike the world in

³⁴John Ray, *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation* (London: Samuel Smith, 1691), 127–28.

³⁵See *ibid.*, 176–77 note 39. Cf. John Hedley Brooke, “‘Wise Men Nowadays Think Otherwise’: John Ray, Natural Theology, and the Meanings of Anthropomorphism,” *Notes Received by the Royal Society of London* 54 (2000): 199–213. Wesley read Ray in late 1732, prior to reading Derham.

³⁶See Sermon 28, “Sermon on the Mount VIII,” §§11, 25–26, *Works* 1:618–19, 628–29; Sermon 50, “The Use of Money,” *Works* 2:266–80; and Sermon 51, “The Good Steward,” §I.1, *Works* 2:283.

³⁷See Sermon 60, “The General Deliverance,” §I.6, *Works* 2:444.

which we live now, with “nature red in tooth and claw” (Tennyson) and humans largely at the mercy of the forces of nature. Differences emerged around the implications drawn from the present fallen condition for human interaction with the rest of nature. Many resigned themselves to the situation, as long as we are in the present world. Among the ones who believed that change was possible, the most significant distinction emerged between those (like Francis Bacon) who championed the mandate to *reclaim the mastery* over creation that was lost in the fall, and those (like Wesley) who pleaded for *resuming the loving stewardship* of creation that we abandoned in the fall.³⁸ While the first two alternatives could acquiesce to (or even justify) the aggressive domination of other creatures by humans, Wesley is representative of the third alternative in his portrayal of such domination as the epitome of the fallen practices that must be set aside.³⁹ Deeply aware of how much damage we have done, the stewardship that Wesley called for us to resume is not only modest but *chastened*.

Soul and Body make a Human (and an Animal!)

A quote from Ludwig Feuerbach can serve to sharpen focus on another element of most of the charges against the Christian worldview that have been considered so far: “Nature, the world, has no value, no interest for Christians. The Christian thinks only of himself and the salvation of his soul.”⁴⁰ While this indictment has an eschatological dimension (to which we will return), its implication is that Christians limit their concern and their ministry in the present to

³⁸This distinction is highlighted in Harrison, “Subduing the Earth,” 102–3.

³⁹See esp. his description of the negative impact of humanity upon creation in Sermon 60, “The General Deliverance,” II, *Works* 2:442–45.

⁴⁰Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 287.

matters affecting “souls.” Rhetorical excerpts that fit this stereotype surely exist. But the holistic emphases of Scripture call it into question. Continuing strands of these emphases can be traced through most of the Christian tradition.

These holistic emphases emerge with increasing clarity in Wesley’s writings and ministry. In his later years he repeatedly appealed to a saying from the early church: “The soul and the body make a man; the Spirit and discipline make a Christian.”⁴¹ He was usually invoking this saying in support of the contribution of the sacraments and of bodily practices like works of mercy to nurturing the spiritual life.⁴² But he also drew the parallel in connection with physical health, as evidenced in his exhortation of one of his assistants: “It will be a double blessing if you give yourself up to the Great Physician, that he may heal soul and body together. And unquestionably this is his design. He wants to give you ... both inward and outward health.”⁴³ If this is God’s design, then for Wesley it was obvious that we should co-operate by doing all that we can to restore and preserve our physical health. Our ministry to others should also address their needs for physical healing as well as for spiritual healing.⁴⁴

While such holistic mission to other humans is admirable, what about the rest of creation? To answer this question, it is helpful to return to Bonnet’s description (in Wesley’s

⁴¹E.g., *Journal* (17 August 1750), *Works* 20:357; Sermon 113, “The Late Work of God in North America,” §I.7, *Works* 3:598; and Sermon 122, “Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity,” §7, *Works* 4:90.

⁴²For more discussion, see Randy L. Maddox, “Wesley’s Prescription for “Making Disciples of Jesus Christ,” *Quarterly Review* 23.1 (2003): 15–28.

⁴³Letter to Alexander Knox (26 October 1778), in *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, edited by John Telford (London: Epworth, 1931), 6:327.

⁴⁴More detail on Wesley’s commitment to health of body and soul can be found in Maddox, “Celebrating the Whole Wesley,” 83–85; and Maddox, “John Wesley on Holistic Health and Healing,” *Methodist History* 46 (Oct. 2007): forthcoming.

Survey) of the character of the chain of being: “There are no sudden changes in nature; all is gradual, and elegantly varied. There is no being which has not either above or beneath it some that resemble it in certain characters, and differ from it in others.”⁴⁵ This conviction led Bonnet to contest directly the influence of his countryman Descartes. In adopting a strict mind-body dualism and restricting mind to humans alone, Descartes essentially reduced all other animals to mere automatons—void of “soul” and even of real perception of pain or suffering. On this basis he argued that human use or abuse of other animals was not a matter of moral import. Bonnet was one of the strongest countervoices, reclaiming the biblical and Aristotelian notion that all animals have “soul” appropriate to their nature and that it is morally wrong when humans deprive animals of life, sustenance, or comfort for any purpose other than those intended within the order of creation.⁴⁶

Descartes was not the first to deny that animals had souls. This stance became a dominant strand in the Western church through the influence of Augustine.⁴⁷ But there were alternative voices, and Wesley became aware of the debate during his Oxford schooling, devoting one of his Master’s lectures to the question of whether animals have souls.⁴⁸ While no copy of the lecture survives, he appears to have defended the biblical language of animals having “soul.” He offered a guarded reaffirmation of this point in 1775, shortly after encountering the writings of Charles

⁴⁵Wesley, *Survey*, 4:73.

⁴⁶This debate is surveyed in Hester Hastings, *Man and Beast in French Thought of the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1936).

⁴⁷The classical origins of this debate and Augustine’s role in appropriating the Stoic model are traced in Richard Sorabji, *Animal Minds and Human Morals: The Origins of the Western Debate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

⁴⁸He records beginning to write the lecture in his Oxford diary on November 27, 1726. He delivered the lecture in February 1727.

Bonnet.⁴⁹ A few years later he published in the *Arminian Magazine* an extended extract of John Hildrop's spirited defense of animal souls, which contested both Cartesians and such notables as John Locke.⁵⁰

Just as Wesley differed from Descartes on the constitution of animals, he differed on the moral import of our treatment of animals.⁵¹ He placed in his *Journal* letters from correspondents decrying the evil of cruelty to animals and included in a sermon to parents a specific warning against letting children mistreat animals.⁵² His instructions to his traveling preachers were even more specific: "Be merciful to your beast. Not only ride moderately, but see with your own eyes that your horse be rubbed, fed, and bedded."⁵³ Clearly Wesley was not among those who believed that Christians should restrict their present moral concern solely to human "souls."

All that God Loves, God will Redeem

The response to Feuerbach's accusation needs to go a step further. There is a long strand of Christian teaching that balances anthropocentric tendencies by calling for humane treatment of

⁴⁹See Sermon 55, "On the Trinity," §11, *Works* 2:382.

⁵⁰Cf. John Hildrop, *Free Thoughts upon the Brute Creation*, 2 vols. (London: R. Minors, 1742–43). Hildrop's first volume summarized critics of the notion that animals have souls. The second is his response, which repeatedly invokes the "chain of being" (cf. 2:39–42, 60–62). Wesley reproduces nearly all of the second volume in *Arminian Magazine* 6 (1783).

⁵¹A helpful study for placing Wesley's concern for animal welfare in context is Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500–1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

⁵²See *Journal* (16 July 1756), *Works* 21:68; and Sermon 95, "On the Education of Children," §25, *Works* 3:360.

⁵³"Large Minutes," Q. 3, §21, in *The Works of John Wesley*, edited by Thomas Jackson (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872) 8:318.

animals, suggesting that our eternal destiny as humans is at stake in such matters.⁵⁴ But through much of the church's history, most who raised such caution failed to include animals themselves (or the rest of creation) within God's *ultimate* salvific concern. Although Scripture speaks of God's goal as the "new heavens and earth" (i.e., transformation of everything in the universe), a variety of influences led Christians increasingly to assume that our final state is "heaven above." The latter was seen as a realm where human spirits dwelling in ethereal bodies join eternally with all other spiritual beings (no animals!) in continuous worship of the Ultimate Spiritual Being.⁵⁵ By contrast, the Christian masses came to assume that the physical universe, which we abandon at death, would eventually be annihilated.⁵⁶ It is this assumption which some critics point to as the deepest flaw in the Christian worldview for supporting broad and enduring environmental concern. If we believe that this world will be destroyed by fire, why try to preserve it?⁵⁷

It is particularly important to observe the development in Wesley's thought on this topic. He imbibed the spiritualized understanding of our final state in his upbringing, and through much of his ministry it was presented as obvious and unproblematic. A good example is the preface to his first volume of *Sermons*:

I am a spirit come from God and returning to God; just hovering over the great gulf, till a few moments hence I am no more seen—I drop into an unchangeable

⁵⁴See Richard D. Ryder, *Animal Revolution: Changing Attitudes toward Speciesism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 31–80.

⁵⁵For a good history of the ascendancy of this model, see Colleen McDannell & Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

⁵⁶Some, like Calvin, allowed that God would recreate the earth, but then denied that it would be the locus for future human existence. We would simply admire the beauty of the new creation from our heavenly locus alongside God and the angels.

⁵⁷See the discussion of this element of the critique of Christianity in Wesley Grandberg-Michaelson, *A Worldly Spirituality: The Call to Redeem Life on Earth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 33–35.

eternity! I want to know one thing, the way to heaven—how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: for this very end he came from heaven.⁵⁸

However, in the last decade of his life Wesley began to reclaim the biblical imagery of God’s cosmic renewal, shifting his focus from “heaven above” to the future new creation.⁵⁹ After his tentative defense of animals having “souls” in 1775, he issued a bold affirmation of final salvation for animals in the 1781 sermon “The General Deliverance.”⁶⁰ While not without precedent, this sermon was unusual for its time and is often cited today as a pioneer effort at reaffirming the doctrine of animal salvation in the Western church.⁶¹ Broadening the scope even further, Wesley’s 1785 sermon on “The New Creation” refused to limit God’s ultimate redemptive purposes to sentient beings, insisting that the very elements of our present universe will be present in the new creation, though they will be dramatically improved over current conditions.⁶²

Some elements of Wesley’s mature embrace of the cosmic scope of God’s salvific mission deserve to be highlighted. First, the issue of theodicy was a significant prod in helping him reclaim this biblical theme. If not at the time, Wesley certainly came to share the sentiments of his friend George Cheyne:

It is utterly incredible that any creature ... should come into this state of being and

⁵⁸*Sermons* (1746), Preface, §5, *Works* 1:105.

⁵⁹For more details on this transition, see Maddox, “Nurturing the New Creation,” 43–49.

⁶⁰Sermon 60, “The General Deliverance,” *Works* 2:437–50.

⁶¹See the positive reference to this sermon in Andrew Linzey, *Christianity and the Rights of Animals* (London: SPCK, 1987), 36. For a sketch of seventeenth-century precedents in Britain of affirming animal salvation, see Philip C. Almond, *Adam and Eve in Seventeenth-Century Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 110–18.

⁶²Sermon 64, “The New Creation,” *Works* 2:500–10.

suffering for no other purpose than we see them attain here. . . . There must be some infinitely beautiful, wise and good scene remaining for all sentient and intelligent beings, the discovery of which will ravish and astonish us one day.⁶³

Wesley's eventual description of this scene would likely have astonished even Cheyne! Wesley had long doubted the adequacy of a theodicy that justified God's goodness in permitting the possibility of the fall by contending that God would eventually simply restore things to their pre-fallen condition. In his view, a truly loving God would only permit the present evil in the world if an *even better* outcome might be achieved by allowing this possibility than without it. On these terms, he believed that God would not just restore the fallen creation to its original state, God would recreate it with greater capacities and blessings than it had at first.⁶⁴ Specifically, in "The General Deliverance" Wesley proposed that as compensation for the evil they experienced in this life God would move the various animals *higher up* the chain of being in the next life—granting them greater abilities, including perhaps even the ability to relate to God as humans do now!⁶⁵

While this proposal might seem to violate the most basic principle of the chain of being, Wesley was almost certainly borrowing it once again (this time, without reference) from Charles Bonnet.⁶⁶ A few years later Wesley republished a translated tract of Bonnet that focused this proposal on human destiny, calling it "one of the most sensible tracts I have ever read." In this tract Bonnet proposes that humans too will move up the chain of being in the next life, having far

⁶³George Cheyne, *An Essay on Regimen* (London: Rivington, 1740), 86–87.

⁶⁴Cf. Sermon 59, "God's Love to Fallen Man," *Works* 2:423–35; and Sermon 63, "The General Spread of the Gospel," §27, *Works* 2:499.

⁶⁵See Sermon 60, "General Deliverance," §III.6–7, *Works* 2:448.

⁶⁶Bonnet presents a model of animals moving up the chain of being in the future life in *La Palingénésie philosophique; or Idées sur l'état passé et sur l'état futur des etres vivans* (2nd edition. Munster: Philip Henry Perrenon, 1770), Parts 1–5 (1:187–97) and 14 (2:62–84). Volume 2 of this work, signed with Wesley's initials and dated as obtained in 1772, is in Wesley's House, London.

greater powers than now, allowing us to explore the entire universe in an unending discovery of the dimensions of God's creation.⁶⁷ Apparently Bonnet found no violation to the integrity of the chain of being if the entire chain shifted upward. The more important point, for our purposes, is that Wesley's interest in this novel suggestion was surely deepened by the apparent convergence in the science of his day with his renewed appreciation of a biblical theme!

Wesley seems to have recognized an important theological convergence as well. He had long rejected the suggestion that God preemptively limited the gift of saving grace to only a portion of humanity (the "elect"), appealing to the biblical affirmation that God's "mercies are over all [God's] works" (Ps. 145:9).⁶⁸ In "The General Deliverance" he used the same verse to affirm God's saving concern for animals.⁶⁹ He was likely not the first to sense the parallel between these two matters. As Alan Rudrum points out, the strongest opponents of the notion of animal salvation in seventeenth-century England were the staunch predestinarians.⁷⁰ In striking contrast, it was the mature Wesley's profound conviction that God's love extends to *all* that God has made, and that God *will* redeem all that God loves.

⁶⁷The tract was a translation of the last section of *La Palingénésie*, by an unidentified translator, issued as *Conjectures Concerning the Nature of Future Happiness* (York: J. Todd, 1785). Wesley's republication—slightly abridged, with his preface and a few notes—was issued with the same title (Dublin: Dugdale, 1787).

⁶⁸Note the invocation of this verse in Sermon 110, "Free Grace," §26, *Works* 3:556; and the preface to the first issue of the *Arminian Magazine*, reprinted in *Works* (Jackson) 14:279.

⁶⁹Note the citation of Ps. 145:9 in Sermon 60, "General Deliverance," §III.10, *Works* 2:449.

⁷⁰See Alan Rudrum, "Henry Vaughan, the Liberation of the Creatures, and Seventeenth-Century English Calvinism," *Seventeenth Century* 4 (1989): 34–54; esp. p. 50.

Anticipating the New Creation

Even if one accepts this cosmic scope for the eschaton, what is the implication of such a future hope for how we treat the broader creation *now*? Insight into this question can be gained from sociological surveys aimed at testing Lynn White's thesis. As these surveys grew in sophistication—controlling for factors like age, gender and education—they increasingly falsified the thesis that Christian affiliation or affirmation of the biblical account of creation would serve as significant indicators for lowered commitment to environmental protection.⁷¹ But one theological factor did emerge as significant: ascription to dispensational eschatology.⁷² This reflects the insistence of classic dispensationalism that things must become *worse* as we approach God's eschatological intervention, with its implication that those who try to slow or reverse this trend are working against the purposes of God.⁷³

This is not the place to critique dispensational eschatology. I would simply note that Wesley's mature thought moved toward an early form of postmillennialism, which cultivated the polar opposite expectation that the church—through the power of the Spirit—was able and

⁷¹For a few samples to provide a sense of the trajectory, see Ronald G. Shaiko, "Religion, Politics, and Environmental Concern," *Social Science Quarterly* 68 (1987): 244–62; Andrew Greeley, "Religion and Attitudes toward the Environment," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 32 (1993): 19–28; Conrad L. Kanagy, & Hart Nelsen, "Religion and Environmental Concern. Challenging the Dominant Assumptions," *Review of Religious Research* 37 (1995): 33–45; and Bernadette Hayes & Manussos Marangudakis, "Religion and Environmental Issues within Anglo-American Democracies," *Review of Religious Research* 42 (2000): 159–74.

⁷²See in particular James Guth et al., "Theological Perspectives and Environmentalism among Religious Activists," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 32 (1993): 373–82; and James Guth et al., "Faith and the Environment: Religious Beliefs and Attitudes on Environmental Policy," *American Journal of Political Science* 39 (1995): 364–82.

⁷³For more on this, see Janel M. Curry-Roper, "Contemporary Christian Eschatologies and the Relation to Environmental Stewardship," *Professional Geographer* 42 (1990): 157–69.

expected to bring about a significant realization of God’s reign in our fallen world.⁷⁴ As such, Wesley defended his speculation about God’s future blessing of animals in “The General Deliverance” on the grounds that it might provide further encouragement for us to *imitate now* the God whose mercy is over all his works.⁷⁵ We are not simply to long for God’s final victory, we are to participate responsively in God’s renewing work by anticipating this victory in our present actions. Avoiding abuse of animals, and helping prevent such abuse by others, is one dimension of how Wesley encouraged his followers to *anticipate the new creation*.

Historical Limitations of Wesley’s Ecotheology

While other convictions could be added, those considered so far should be sufficient to give a sense of Wesley’s counterbalance to the spiritualizing and anthropocentric tendencies that have made their way into much Christian teaching and practice. They also illustrate the dynamic interaction between his inherited convictions, his engagement with the science of his day, and his openness to hearing anew the witness of God’s revelation in Scripture and in creation. Wesley’s precedent serves well as a model—and provides some key theological foundations—for the urgent task of articulating and embodying an adequate ecotheology and environmental ethic.

But Wesley’s precedent also has limitations, leaving much for heirs of his theological vision to do as we seek to “anticipate the new creation” faithfully in our time. To begin with, in part because it became prominent only in his later years, Wesley offers few details about the ethical implications of his theological convictions. More importantly, the suggestions that he

⁷⁴For details on this point, see Maddox, “Nurturing the New Creation,” 34–41.

⁷⁵Sermon 60, “General Deliverance,” §III.10, *Works* 2:449.

does make often reflect background assumptions that, while broadly shared in the science and/or theology of his time, are no longer convincing.

For example, Wesley stood in a long exegetical tradition that read the account of the Garden of Eden as presenting all animal species originally tame or domesticated, rendering “wildness” and “wilderness” as unfortunate results of the fall. This would imply that the way to “anticipate the new creation” is to subject all wilderness areas to human cultivation and to domesticate all animal species. While Wesley never specifically encouraged either of these agendas, there is little in his thought that stressed the alternative of trying to preserve wilderness areas and the relative autonomy of animals native to these areas (agendas integral to current ecological theory).

One might assume that the “chain of being” approach to biology which Wesley embraced would lead to emphasis on preserving all habitats in their current state. But one must recall that this model assumed the chain was static—with no species either going extinct or emerging as truly novel. Wesley joined most in his day in wedding this assumption to the exegetical tradition of “domestic” Eden, allowing that the fall *distorted* the nature of species but dismissing the possibility that it changed them into new species with an integrity of their current form. On these terms, domestication of wild animals and cultivation of wilderness areas could be considered a praiseworthy undoing of the sinful distortion of their nature.

The dominant streams in natural history and evolutionary biology over the last two centuries have decisively rejected both the assumption of a domesticated primal state and the assumption that species neither emerge nor go extinct over time. The emphasis instead has been on the historical contingency of species, with debates over how various natural factors may

constrain this contingency. Contemporary heirs of Wesley, like other Christians, must engage this change of emphasis as we seek to develop an adequate ecotheology and environmental ethic. This engagement is likely to deepen our appreciation for the chastened modesty of Wesley's model of human stewardship of the larger creation. We must acknowledge the ways in which our actions have contributed to the extinction of species in settings and at a rate far beyond what would be occurring with less human impact. We must also acknowledge that our ability to understand and control environmental factors is much more limited than Enlightenment culture encouraged us to believe. In the process, we are likely to adopt a more limited role for humanity in governing creation than did Wesley.⁷⁶

Another theme central to current ecological science is the complex interdependence of life. If we truly care about animals, then we must also care about the habitats that sustain them. While the "chain of being" model could imply this, its assumption of no extinction undercut the urgency of concern. Thus, the specific ethical injunctions we find in Wesley about human treatment of the larger creation are limited to animal welfare. He could not envision the threat of our agricultural and technological impact leading to the destruction of whole ecosystems and the animal species dependent on these ecosystems. We must deal with this threat, and enter into the complex issues concerning the interplay of human welfare and the welfare of the rest of creation.

There is at least one other theme which must be engaged by Wesley's contemporary heirs in work on ecotheology and environmental ethics. As noted earlier, his "chain of being" model has been touted as a forerunner of modern ecology because of its emphasis on the balance of

⁷⁶See in this regard Laura A. Bartels, "The Political Image as the Basis for Wesleyan Ecological Ethics," *Quarterly Review* 23 (2003): 294–301; and Kathleen Braden, "On Saving the Wilderness: Why Christian Stewardship is Not Sufficient," *Christian Scholar's Review* 28 (1998): 254–69.

nature. Even though they had to adjust the model to allow for emergence of new species, most ecologists over the last fifty years retained its emphasis on the *enduring* interdependence of ecosystems. As a result, their suggested ideal for environmental action has been the preservation of all species indefinitely. A growing number of ecologists are challenging this ideal as one-sided.⁷⁷ They argue that natural history has always been marked by *flux* as much as it has by balance. New species emerge regularly, and just as routinely species die off. Frequently the disappearance of one species from an ecosystem is integral to the possibility of a new species emerging. As such, these ecologists dispute that “natural law” mandates the environmental agenda of preserving all species. Some theologians have echoed this point, suggesting that a Christian environmental ethic should be oriented less by romantic assumptions about primal creation than by God’s innovative work of “new creation.”⁷⁸ Given his emphasis on the surpassing nature of the new creation, Wesley’s heirs may have something to contribute to this dialogue over our responsibility for helping preserve God’s creative legacy while remaining open to God’s creative innovations.

⁷⁷A good introduction to this challenge is *Religion and the New Ecology: Environmental Responsibility in a World in Flux*, edited by David M. Lodge & Christopher Hamlin (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

⁷⁸See especially John Haught, “Theology and Ecology in an Unfinished Universe,” in *ibid*, 226–45.