



The Evangelical Ecologist

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One of the more exasperating characteristics of the biblical God is that He, inferior to greater souls in this regard, seems to evince very little reverence for life. By this I mean His attitude toward the biological life we prize so highly in ourselves and by natural extension in other living things seems to be entirely, and jealously, proprietary, and that what we would bestow more generously, had we the power, He, in accordance with His own lights, keeps short and difficult. We humans in particular, who would be gods, He quickly recycles: "Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay, might stop a hole to keep the wind away."

The scriptures show him removing life from the whole earth when men displease Him, contemplating this event not only once, but twice, "the fire next time." The attitude that seems to please Him most toward this gift which seems so precious to us that we are constantly tempted to define our being by it is "the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away—Blessed be the Name of the Lord."

Now comes E. O. Wilson, complaining to Christians about the loss of plant and animal species. In *The Creation*, Wilson asks the imaginary Baptist pastor to whom the book is addressed to search his faith for reason to make common cause in earth-saving with Wilson's own secular humanism, the dogmatics of which assert that

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"heaven and hell are what we create for ourselves on this planet. There is no other home." To this end, the eminent biologist and teacher writes this charming paean to "creation," threatened by numerous extinctions, especially those caused by human activity.

Kermit the Frog, to summarize the situation, in a phrase, is sick. And to varying degrees so is much of the rest of the living world. Might *Homo sapiens* follow? Maybe, maybe not. But with certainty we are the giant meteorite of our time, having begun the sixth mass extinction of Phanerozoic history. We are creating a less stable and interesting place for our descendants to inherit.

They will understand and love life more than we, and they will not be inclined to honor our memory.

In the biographical postscript, Wilson, himself raised a Southern Baptist, is described as “lastingly influenced by the lyrical and spiritual power of evangelical Christianity.” In his opening salutation he emphasizes that he began where the minister remains: “As a boy I too answered the altar call; I went under the water. Although I no longer belong to the faith, I am confident that if we met and spoke privately of our deepest beliefs, it would be in a spirit of mutual respect and good will. I know we share many precepts of moral behavior.”

Wilson reveals himself to be, in his own way, what he knows his Baptist minister is—a passionately religious man. If religion is devotion to an Ultimate Concern, an incalculably worthy reality beyond man himself, accompanied by a disciplined piety in service of that reality, then Wilson by the presents of this book is not simply a biologist in the sense of a student of organic life, but exalts *bios* as *logos*, believes science of the Darwinian persuasion its proper mode of worship, and regards his responsibility thereto as a ministerial vocation. *The Creation* is an evangelistic tract seeking to enlist the cooperation of Christians of the sort who are “literalist interpreters of Holy Scripture” in seeking

to preserve the life-diversity of the biosphere as an aspect of their own religious duty to which they have heretofore been insufficiently attentive.

From Wilson’s viewpoint the world is not and never has been “for man,” in the sense of subject to a right of human dominion, but rather in some way for itself—and by extension for its component species, among which man takes a place where his responsibility for its use is not principally to God, in accordance with an eschatology assumed in divine directives, or to the human race, in accordance with a philosophical concept of human good, but to the biosphere itself. The *summum bonum* in view, the ethical end humanity as earth’s most powerful species is bound to seek, is the maximum health, abundance, and diversity of living things.

The principal difference in the horizons against which orthodox Christianity and earth-piety work is that the earth as it presently exists is the eschatological *telos* of the latter’s vision, while for the former it is subsumed under the more general category of Creation. The concept of Creation carries with it belief in the biblical God as its Creator, and thus acquires subordination to a purpose in which it exists not as the *end* of a vision, as it must be to non-theists who believe in no other home, but a *means* to the accomplishment of a divine purpose that transcends and shall eventually subsume it.

Here, then, is the first inescapable offense Christianity gives to earth-piety: the earth as we know it empirically is not a final thing but a *first* creation. The second offense is that Christianity's principal reason for the earth's existence is to serve the cause of human redemption, to be defined and carried out not by what seems reasonable to man, but the purpose and method of God. The earth is presented to the faith as sacramental, and as sacrament its end is to be consumed so that a second and higher Creation may come. Its end is as the end of man who has been made from and returns to its dust, who must pass away so the Second and Eternal Man can arise to take his place in a new heaven and earth, the old having passed away. It is difficult to exaggerate the breadth and depth of the chasm that exists between biblical religion and earth-piety.

Let me suggest that the rule for proper treatment of the biosphere contemplated by the scriptures is not based in consideration of biological life itself, but upon the law of love of God and neighbor—not, to be sure, the *only* rules we are called to live by, but the greatest ones—the “law and the prophets” by which all the others are defined and controlled. The extinction of species by the cutting of tropical rain forests, for example, rightly concerns us for the sake of the glories of divine creation that are destroyed

thereby, but in the Christian mind that is part of a complex hierarchy of considerations involving a larger view of reality that cannot be controlled principally by concern about extinction or biodiversity—a complex that is ultimately governed by the will of God for whom it does not appear that solicitude for the preservation of His first creation is *in itself* a matter of the highest order. Wilson, having been raised among Christians, understands this—thus the need for this book.

Where these laws intersect with the concerns of biological religion, and I am sure they do in many places, we can anticipate cooperative efforts between the adherents of both faiths. Wilson's love of the abundance and intricacy of the creation is in Christian eyes no mean thing, for it is connected in some essential way with appreciation of the Mind of the Creator who in the *Great Jeu d'Esprit* brought it into being.

Christians, however, along with other theists, will remain aware that those who have chosen not to believe in God, and have in the classic act of idolatry—venerating the creature rather than the Creator—set something else in His place, will have not only their metaphysics but their ethics controlled by their piety, and that is where we may expect disagreements to arise, one suspects sooner rather than later—particularly with regard to political enforcement of measures Christians regard as

inhumane. While there may be a vestigial remnant of traditional faith in certain of its adherents, one can expect that its effects on the central stream of biosebastian thought and action will not be decisive.

The endearing Professor Wilson, who is after all a humanist, and who as such shares many precepts of moral behavior with Christians, may

prove a very imperfect representative of those who, using the logical and methodological rigor of the science he praises, are more perfectly devoted to biodiversity. For these, in the end, humanism's loyalties are as misplaced as those of Christianity.

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