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Stewardship: Solution or problem?¹

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Abstract

The Jewish-Christian tradition has been partly blamed for creating an attitude towards the environment that sees it as something to be dominated by humans and exploited for their benefit. These traditions also stress the idea that humans are ‘stewards’ of creation, given the task to look after the planet for God. What does it mean to steward creation, and does stewardship offer a solution to the escalating ecological crisis? This article draws on the author’s research and experience to raise challenging questions for our generation.

Keywords

Christianity; creation; dominion; environmentalism; religion

Stewardship of Creation

In the 1960s people in the USA and Europe were becoming aware of a growing environmental crisis. Demographers worried about how to feed the burgeoning populations in places such as India or China, and there was a rush to develop more intensive forms of agriculture that would yield better harvests. Rachel Carson’s influential book *Silent Spring*, (Carson, 1963), highlighted the way in which pesticides such as DDT and Dieldrin, that had been so beneficial to farmers, were having devastating effects on wildlife. The nuclear arms race between the West and the Soviet Union was at its height, and there were some frightening accidents at nuclear power stations such as the Windscale fire at Sellafield in 1957. Humans became aware as never before that what they did could actually destroy or seriously degrade the entire planet.

Against this backdrop, Lynn White Jr published a paper in which he argued that the root cause of what he called our ‘ecologic crisis’ could be traced back to some forms of religion (White, 1967). His argument was that Baconian ideas about science and technology merging to give humans power over nature only really took hold in the West in the nineteenth century. The pre-existing worldview that shaped how the industrial revolution unfolded was actually that of Medieval Western Christianity, and in particular the long-standing perspective on human relationships with creation. It was the literal interpretation of the account of creation in the Bible that had led Western societies to have a destructive attitude towards the environment. In Genesis 1:28 God says to the man and woman he has created “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the

earth.” (New Revised Standard Version). Animals and plants were depicted as resources for humans to exploit and that, said White, was where the problem arose.

White’s suggestion was that this notion of human ‘dominion’ over creation had led to a world-view that separates us from the rest of creation, making it easier for us to pursue our own success at the expense of other creatures with whom we share the planet. White suggested that religions such as Zen Buddhism offered a totally opposite view to the Western Judaeo-Christian attitude.

Responses to White’s paper were mixed. Some rejected any connection between Christianity and a belief in ‘dominion’ over nature, arguing instead for a more ‘sacramental’ perspective whereby creation is seen to be a sign of God’s presence (Haught, 1993). A number of sociologists, mainly in the USA, looked for connections between people taking a literal view of the Bible and having little concern for the environment. Results were mixed (Hitzhusen, 2007), but there was some evidence that Fundamentalist or conservative Protestant churchgoers may have less concern for the environment than their fellow citizens.

Some theologians stressed the idea that what the Bible says about humans is that they are ‘stewards of creation’, that is, they were made in order to look after God’s creation, not to exploit it. This was an increasingly popular notion (Berry, 2006), though it is not necessarily directly traceable to Scripture. Bauckham (2006) argued that it is often thought to be strongly rooted in Christian tradition, but in reality it arose in the early modern era, at a time when humans were gaining more control over nature. This control was understood as carrying ethical responsibilities that were related to the inherent value of creation. Human interaction with other creatures and the earth’s resources must involve respect for justice, an idea that is reflected today in the World Council of Churches under the programme unit ‘Justice, diakonia and responsibility for creation’ (WCC, 2013). Stewardship implies that humans are accountable to God for what they do to God’s creation, and that the relationship with creation is one of care or guardianship.

Stewardship is still ‘anthropocentric’ in that it places humans in a superior and central position in creation (Palmer, 1992). In this sense, some argue, it is not that different from ideas of human dominion (Horan, 2018). On planet earth this centrality of humans would seem to accord with our experience. Whatever our evolutionary links to other animals, no other species comes even close to our level of mental ability, technological sophistication, and ability to manipulate ecosystems. It may be comforting to think that humans are ‘looking after’ the planet, but the reality of how humans have shaped the natural world shows just how

complicated it is to ‘manage’ the environment. Even when we think we are doing good, our activities inevitably have mixed effects.

This article seeks to illustrate the complexity of ‘stewardship’ by drawing somewhat serendipitously on the confluence of three personal and apparently unrelated strands. The first strand emerges from my work as a practical theologian who has studied beliefs and attitudes related to creation and the environment among churchgoers. The second strand emerges from a life of changing careers and decisions about my pending retirement. The third strand comes from a trip to Hawaii in the autumn of 2019.

Strand 1: Research

In 2009, Sylvia Baker and I did a survey of churchgoers in which we explored their beliefs about creation, interpretation of Genesis, and attitudes towards the environment. The work led to several papers (Village, 2014; Village & Baker, 2013a, 2013b) and a follow up survey (Village, 2020; Village & Baker, 2018). In one paper (Village, 2015), I tested White’s hypothesis by seeing if there was any relationship between how literally people interpreted Genesis and how much they were willing to make sacrifices to protect the environment. One novel aspect of the study was that the questionnaires had included items designed to measure three ‘theological stances’ towards creation: Dominion, Stewardship, and Sacramentalism. The latter included ideas such as ‘All of Creation is sacred’, ‘God is present in all Creation’, and ‘God is revealed in Creation as much as in the Bible’.

The results showed a complex pattern of relationships (Figure 1). In support of White, there was evidence that people who interpreted Genesis more literally did have a stronger ‘dominion’ view of creation and less concern for a range of environmental matters. Reduced concern led, in turn, to unwillingness to make sacrifices to protect the environment. The situation was complicated, however, because literalists also positively espoused the notions of sacramentalism and stewardship, and the latter was the key driver for concern over the environment.

What do these results suggest about the place of stewardship among churchgoers? It seems that those who interpreted Genesis literally also tended to affirm simultaneously that humans have some dominion over creation, that God is intimately connected with creation, and that humans have a stewardship role in relation to creation. These may be partly

compatible ideas, though it is hard to stress dominion at the same time as stressing sacramentalism since the two are in many ways the opposite of one another. What emerged most obviously was that stewardship, more than anything else, was linked to concern for the environment, and concern is most likely to drive willingness to act.

Strand 2: Birds in Southern Scotland

My first career as an ornithologist began in the 1970s when I did a PhD on kestrels in South Scotland. Forty years and some major career shifts later I approached retirement as a professor of practical theology and wondered what would fill my time in the next decade or so. I decided that I would return to my original study area and see how kestrels are doing now. The answer seems to be that they are not doing well at all. It is this strand that provides a context for some reflections on stewarding the countryside. This case study could be repeated in rural areas across the UK and globally.

The Southern Uplands of Scotland include some of the most beautiful and isolated parts of Britain. Fifty years ago, these hills were mainly barren grassland and heather moor, similar to some parts of the Moffat Hills today. This may look like a natural landscape, but in fact it is very different from what it would have been before humans arrived in the area. After the last Ice Age, 10,000 years ago, the vegetation gradually recovered until most of the area was dense oak woodland (Smout, 2004). Humans began clearing this for farming over 5,000 years ago, probably by burning in a manner not dissimilar to clearing rainforests today. The rate of clearance has varied since then, but by the middle of the nineteenth century there was virtually no native woodland left. The animals and birds that lived in the ancient woods have long gone, some such as bears, wolves, beavers and goshawks became extinct in Britain. The change favoured open-country birds such as eagles, ravens, curlews, and meadow pipits. People got used to this denuded habitat, eventually coming to think of it as ‘natural’ and ‘wild’. Yet this was an industrial landscape that was almost entirely devoted to supporting a wool industry that allowed Border towns like Hawick, Jedburgh, and Galashiels to flourish.

In the 1960s and 1970s sheep farming became unprofitable, the Border towns fell onto hard times, and the land was turned over to huge forestry plantations. What was planted was not native deciduous trees but imported conifers such as Sitka spruce. These grew well in vast monoculture stands, eventually providing timber for sawmills and pulp factories. In the early years the trees were small and the grass grew rapidly, providing habitats for small mammals such as field voles. These in turn attracted large numbers of vole predators, such as

kestrels and owls, which is what took me to the area in the late 1970s (Village, 2010). The demise of some species was to the benefit of others.

When I returned to the area in 2018, the plantations had matured, making the area look very different again. Blocks of spruce ready for harvest are now mixed with replanted areas as the new rotation gets underway. The forest industry is booming, providing employment for people who work the machines and lorries that take the wood to sawmills and factories. This is intensive forestry on a massive scale, with huge machines scything through stands of trees at an astonishing rate. The clear-fell looks like a moonscape, with tangles of stumps and brash churned by the tracks of machines. Within a year the replanting is complete, and the cycle begins again.

The wildlife has changed dramatically once more as the new habitat favours different species. Buzzards, now less persecuted by gamekeepers than they used to be, flourish in this mosaic of open areas and mature woodland. Goshawks, mostly escapees from falconers, re-established themselves in Britain from the 1970s, and they too do well in this new habitat. However, smaller birds of prey such as kestrels and owls, are now very scarce, perhaps as a result of there being more of these larger ‘apex’ predators. The raptor fauna of the area has changed completely in half a lifetime.

Human management or ‘stewardship’ of this region has benefited people in different ways over the centuries but has also had profound effects on the flora and fauna. This is not a new phenomenon, and that is part of the problem, especially in the UK. Humans have altered the environment so completely for so long that we no longer notice. We trek across the empty hills and admire the grandeur of God without realising we are looking at land that has been more effectively stripped and plundered than any part of the Amazon rainforest. It just happened long enough ago that we do not notice. We applaud the planting of millions of trees as if that were somehow ‘wilding’ the landscape again. The coming of commercial forestry to the region in my lifetime gives me eyes to notice the complexity of the changes that we have wrought on the environment. My desire to study one small aspect of the wildlife shows me how much damage that entails.

Strand 3: Birds in Hawai’i

The third strand allows me to reflect on another issue that has been part of human stewardship for centuries, but which has recently become a hot topic: the extinction of species. The story of Hawai’i shows how rapidly humans can change an area and how their activity can have both intended and unintended consequences (Pratt & Jeffrey, 2013). This

volcanic island chain is the most isolated in the world, lying as it does in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. As with the Galapagos Islands, a single species of finch arrived on the archipelago tens of thousands of years ago and began to evolve into different species than filled the niches occupied by very different birds in other parts of the world. A good example is the colourful Iwi'i, which has evolved a very un-finch like beak to sip nectar from native trees. This unique avifauna began to change when the first humans arrived from Polynesia, probably around 800 CE. They brought exotic food plants with them which rapidly established in their new home. A second wave of migrants in the 1300s may have brought pigs and chickens, which soon became feral and began changing the landscape. Change to the environment is not the prerogative of the West- it happens wherever there are humans.

When James Cook stumbled across Hawaii in 1778, he opened the way to European and American settlement, and human influence took on new directions. Within a few years, captain George Vancouver brought goats to the island to feed his sailors; the goats escaped, and their descendants now run wild on many islands, devastating natural plants. In the nineteenth century, Christian missionaries came to help the native peoples, introducing new crops and animals. Sugar cane was a valuable crop for a while, giving work and wealth to the growing population. The cane became infested with rats that had arrived on sailing ships, so the farmers bought in mongooses to eat the rats. But rats are nocturnal and mongooses hunt during the day, so the rats were safe, but the native birds were easy prey. Stewarding is difficult business.

Another stowaway on the ships were mosquitoes, which brought with them a form of avian malaria. The native species were defenceless and now there are none where there are mosquitoes. Many native birds are already extinct, and the remaining ones are limited to the high mountains, where mosquitoes cannot live. But as the climate warms (human stewards at work again), the mosquitoes get higher up the mountains year by year, and the future for the remaining species is bleak. Hawai'i is part of the USA, richest country in the world, and a place where many people want to visit for their holidays. Meeting the demands of residents and visitors has put a huge strain on the wildlife of these islands.

We are increasingly being made aware of the way that human activity is leading to the extinction of other species. The miracle of modern wildlife photography brings distant parts of the planet to our screens, and we can see close-up extraordinary animals and plants in exquisite detail. Sadly, the commentary usually tells us that this plant or this animal is threatened with extinction. Some presenters will then tell us that the loss of every species threatens the biodiversity of the planet and therefore human existence. Well-meaning though

this is, it is generally not true. The one inescapable fact of our stewardship is that we have made it possible for humans to exist and thrive in the absence of thousands of other living things. Our adaptability allows us to reduce living things to just those few we need for our survival. It is the genius and horror of our species. The problem is not that we cannot live without the Iwi'i; it is that we can.

Being realistic about stewardship

These three strands highlight some important issues. The empirical research tells us that the notion of stewardship is pivotal for churchgoers. Whether or not they see the world as primarily a theatre for divine-human interaction, with the underlying idea that we are the species that really matters to God, most Christians seem to believe that we are in some sense tasked with 'looking after' the world. This is not *our* world but God's. This belief is partly what makes us willing to make sacrifices to preserve the environment. The problem is that we do not really know what it is we are meant to be doing on God's behalf. This is not just a Christian dilemma: many others with no religious commitments might believe that we are stewards looking after the planet for future generations. What sort of planet should we hand on? A planet that is good for humans to live in, or one that is good for all the currently surviving species? Naïvely we imagine that good stewards can do both, but can they?

This is where the second and third strands have something to say. My background and particular experiences show me how negatively our 'stewardship' affects other living things. For millennia we have turned ecosystems that are inhospitable to humans into ones that enable us to thrive. The post-glacial lands of South Scotland could support humans, but only if we excluded other creatures, whose required resources are at odds with ours. We struggled to begin with, and 'subduing nature' barely scratched the surface; but we became better and better at it and with increasing momentum we found ways of living just about anywhere. If this planet is intended as a home for humans, if we really were meant to subdue other creatures be fruitful and multiply, then our stewardship has been a spectacular success. The massive change in habitats and the extinction of other species is not an unfortunate side effect, it is a necessity: human success *must* involve transformation of the world and that transformation means the death of other living things. They die that we might live. We may want to imagine we can all live happily in the ark, but brute reality makes mockery of our idealism.

Here is a reality that requires some theological catching up. I am not sure if metaphors of humans created in the divine image and living in the harmony of Eden until the Fall really

do justice to who we are. There was probably never a time when we lived harmoniously with our environment- indeed you could argue that what makes us human, what marks us out as different from other creatures, is our ability to change the environment and create discord with those other creatures. The Anthropocene era (in which we live) is named precisely because it is the epoch in which the planet has been shaped more by *Homo sapiens* than anything else. While the timing of the start of human influence is disputed, what is more important are the terms in which we conceive it. In purely scientific terms it is the period when rapid cultural adaptation replaced natural selection in a species that has as a result exploded numerically and modified the ecosphere like no other before. In religious terms we try to make sense of this as humans set apart by divine fiat: given something that takes us beyond our creaturely origins to a place a little below angels, made in the image of God, destined for eternity. The language of creation and fall seems the only way that we can reconcile the uniqueness of our race: capable of so much creativity, culpable of so much destruction.

This tension is evident in recent Christian writing on the environment. Pope Francis in the encyclical *Laudato Si'* reiterates familiar ground when he locates the 'problem' as the rupture of sin:

The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations. This in turn distorted our mandate to "have dominion" over the earth (cf. Gen 1:28), to "till it and keep it" (Gen 2:15). As a result, the originally harmonious relationship between human beings and nature became conflictual (cf. Gen 3:17-19). (Pope Francis, 2015 paragraph 66)

I think the danger in this view is that it does not take seriously the deeply inherent nature of our species. It imagines the possibility of human 'harmony' and 'oneness' with creation by positing these as our true and original state, to which we must strive to return. The recent growing rejection of the 'stewardship' paradigm, which rightly identifies its inability to escape the idea of 'dominion', tends to offer Franciscan notions of 'kinship' with all creatures as a better alternative (Horan, 2018; Meconi, 2016b; Warners & Heun, 2019). Indeed, Lynn White in his original article posited St Francis as offering a different sort of attitude to the natural world, which replaces the 'monarchy' of humans with a 'democracy' of all creatures. While as a Christian and an ecologist I applaud this, I think there is also a danger of moving us from one fantasy to another.

The first fantasy is to imagine that we can 'look after' the planet: patently we cannot. As a race, we have neither the skill nor the inclination, despite the presence of some noble

intentions and desires. At best we offset damage by countless minor ‘rescue’ missions which, while important and worth doing, cannot set aside the stark reality of the Anthropocene. The second fantasy is to image that we can live in ‘kinship’ and ‘harmony’ with the rest of creation. We never have because we are human, and humans do not harmonize, they adapt, change, destroy, build, and exploit.

At the heart of this dilemma is trying to find the right ways of understanding the status of living things and the status of human beings in relation to God. Meconi (2016a, p. 7), argues that *Laudato Si’* strikes a good balance on the nature of living things:

On the one hand, any contemporary care of creation must resist sacralizing subhuman creatures; on the other, we must refuse to reduce creatures to merely natural objects to be manipulated and exploited for human gain only. Pope Francis himself captured this balancing act well throughout *LS*, teaching that an ecological spirituality “is not to put all living beings on the same level nor to deprive human beings of their unique worth and the tremendous responsibility it entails. Nor does it imply a divinization of the earth which would prevent us from working on it and protecting it in its fragility”

Stewardship in a similar way tries to balance humans between the two extremes of a being just another creature, striving like all others to survive and propagate the species, and being a creature uniquely charged with tending the rest of creation, making real the divine presence on earth. My argument is that this latter balancing act leaves us trapped because in reality we are neither one nor the other. We are, like it or not, different from anything else that has evolved on earth, but as a species we cannot claim with any credence to be looking after the earth for anyone but ourselves.

At this point you may be screaming that this is un-Godly, un-Christian heresy that offers no hope when hope is most needed. Good- that is where I think we need to go to find some real hope, rather than hope that can only fail us in the end. Real hope is based on reimagining reality, not blocking out reality with grandiose idealism.

The reality is that the changes humans are bringing to the earth will continue into the future. We will almost certainly find ways of enabling our species to survive, but not before we have caused the loss or massive decline of many other species and the replacement of ecosystems by ones suited to our needs. In this context, it is difficult to rely too heavily on theology derived from Genesis: it cannot carry the freight of the modern world². We should stop telling that world that we humans are meant to be looking after the planet for God, or

² Richard Briggs (2010) makes a similar point in relation to humans created in the image of God. He suggests that what this idea means can only be understood as the Scriptural witness unfolds onto the New Testament.

that we could make it all better if only we were not fallen sinners. Instead, we need to get alongside the many people from all races and religions (and no religion) who are just doing what they can to move us away from the worst excesses of human greed and stupidity. We are not returning to the Garden of Eden; we are just trying to make the best of the garden we are in now.

What Christians can offer, and this is where the hope comes in, is a compelling understanding of how humans can effect change. It starts with the individual experience of a profound change of mind (*metanoia* or ‘repentance’) that arises from encountering something beyond ourselves. It finds the momentum for change in the Spirit that convicts and inspires. It is based on displacing self-gratification as the key goal of life and replacing it with living in ways that promote the good of others, including other creatures. It understands that the influence of one person’s change is like mustard seed: it spreads from small beginnings that lead to massive ends. It understands that the being and actions of small groups in society are like yeast in dough. It understands that apparently futile acts of self-sacrifice, even paying the ultimate price, can actually change the course of human history. It believes and hopes that there is the possibility of redemption and resurrection. Christians have a Gospel that offers the world a coherent theory of how *Homo sapiens* can become different from other living things in more positive ways than we have managed heretofore.

This might seem like small beer compared with humans having the power to look after the planet. It might seem a little human-centred compared with losing ourselves in cosmic oneness and the unity of all living things. Yet it offers, I suggest, a more grounded way of understanding who we are and what the task is that faces us. I think it starts with being able to look at the world around us with a more intense and engaged gaze. Pope Francis refers to the ‘gaze of Jesus’, which perhaps needs to be our starting point:

Jesus took up the biblical faith in God the Creator, emphasizing a fundamental truth: God is Father (cf. Mt 11:25). In talking with his disciples, Jesus would invite them to recognize the paternal relationship God has with all his creatures. With moving tenderness he would remind them that each one of them is important in God’s eyes: “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God” (Lk 12:6). “Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them” (Mt 6:26). The Lord was able to invite others to be attentive to the beauty that there is in the world because he himself was in constant touch with nature, lending it an attention full of fondness and wonder. (Pope Francis, 2015 paragraphs 96-97)

What humans have done to the world is an inevitable consequence of what we are. What we are also gives us the ability to imagine different worlds and perhaps make those worlds a reality. What God gives to humans is a different gaze, an ultimate reason to work towards those better worlds, and the power steward our own lives.

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Figure 1 Relationships of literal interpretation of Genesis to theological stance to Creation and environmentalism (after Village 2015).

Note. Solid line: positive correlation; broken line: negative correlation.

