# The Fate of Nature

Howard J Fisher

## ABSTRACT

*The Judaeo-Christian tradition of Creation with its directives for humans to subdue and to have dominion over the Earth has been seen as a factor in the generation of negative or exploitative attitudes towards the natural world, especially among Christians who interpret the Creation stories literally. As a corrective, in recent decades scholars have developed a rationale for stewardship of nature based on these same and other Biblical passages. However, much less attention has been given to the implications of beliefs about the end-time (eschatology). Seventh-day Adventists, along with some other Christians, anticipate that a fiery obliteration of the Earth's surface will usher in the kingdom of God. Logically such beliefs might not be expected to generate any particular concern for the well-being of the non-human Creation. A few Adventist authors have called for some amendment to or revision of traditionally-held eschatology as it concerns the fate of nature. Nevertheless there is some evidence that many Seventh-day Adventists feel that there is a basis for caring for the Creation in spite of its imminent annihilation. However, in company with many Biblical literalists, practical action is generally lacking from personal agenda. Some reasons for the apparent dissonance between eschatological beliefs and environmental concern are suggested.*

Over the last few decades it has become popular to place the blame for the world's environmental problems at the feet of the Judaeo-Christian tradition and its allegedly Bible-based doctrine of human dominion over the Creation. In 1967 Lynn White, an historian, published an article in the journal *Science* in which he claimed that in the medieval era the Bible had been understood to mean that the natural world was created largely for the purpose of meeting human needs. Most Christians believed that Genesis 1:26–28 conferred mastery over nature on humanity. In the context of this viewpoint, the western, Christianized world acquired the technological capacity to subjugate nature, with disastrous consequences. Stung by White, theologians rushed to reinterpret the Scriptures so that the "dominion" of genesis became "stewardship", and just twelve years later Rifkin declared that " . . . one would be hard pressed to find a leading Protestant scholar . . . who would openly question the *new* interpretation . . ." (Rifkin 1979) (emphasis mine).

The 1990s saw the publication of a number of studies in which social data were examined for possible connections between religious affiliation or belief and environmental concern (eg, Eckberg and Blocker, 1989,1996; Kanagy and Willits 1993; Hornsby-Smith and Procter 1995; Blombery 1996; Black 1997). Gen-

erally there have been some suggestions of an association between religious profession and negative environmental attitudes, although sometimes the link has been weak and in a couple of instances no link has been demonstrated at all. The results obtained by Eckberg and Blocker (1996) provide an example of a study in which some connection was found: for Americans there was a positive correlation between biblical literalism and lack of environmental concern. However, it appears that virtually all of these studiEs have more-or-less followed White in attempting to make the link between Christianity and environmental apathy or antipathy via Genesis 1:26–28 (the "dominion" passage). But given that most are now reinterpreting "dominion" as "stewardship", those who wish still to test White's hypothesis in fact may not find appropriate data from surveys of Christians in the late twentieth or early twenty-first centuries. For the most part the dominion theology has been corrected and Christians have been re-educated, at least in theory.

While on the one hand our "beginnings" have been made environmentally-friendly, what, on the other hand, of our "endings"? Very few investigators appear to have attempted to look at or for connections between beliefs concerning eschatology and environmental attitudes. Thus Gowan in 1986 could conclude (p 108) ". . . as yet almost nothing has been done with the eschatological aspect of the Bible's theology of nature." This is still largely true. Janel Curry-Roper (1990) stated her belief ". . . that eschatology is the most ecologically decisive component of a theological system. It influences adherents' actions and determines their views of mankind, their bodies, souls and worldviews."

Intuitively, we might expect that when the eschatological viewpoint held involves a literalist interpretation of apocalyptic literature, attitudes to environmental issues will be generally apathetic or antipathetic. Apocalyptic is here used in the popular sense of a way of speaking of future events that portends disaster. James Watt, Ronald Reagan's infamous Secretary of the Interior (1981–1983), comes to mind. He has been ". . . quoted as belittling concerns about environmental protection in part because it would all be destroyed by God in the apocalypse" (Gore 1992, p 263). An American study by Heather Boyd showed that amongst 'religion variables', "Fundamentalist tradition stood out as the Christian variable of importance. It predicted lack of support for environ-mentalism. Concern with the 'end times' and evangelizing people for eternal life in heaven, combined with suspicion of the environmental movement as both a liberal and a secular movement may lend itself to a lack of concern for the environment" (Boyd 1999).

In discussing Paul Santmire's *Travail of Nature* (1985), Bridger wrote in 1990, ". . . until recently, theological ethicists have neglected the eschatological dimension in ecological discussion. . . If Santmire is correct (in his eschatological reading of biblical faith and in Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom and of Paul's writings) we are justified in concluding that with a few recent exceptions (of whom Jürgen Moltmann is the most notable) the treatment of ecology has centred almost exclusively on refining and developing a stewardship ethic based on the concept of dominion found in the creation narratives and worked out in Old Testament social legislation" (Bridger 1990).

Just as there is a spectrum of environmental attitudes within the Christian community, so there is also a spectrum of eschatological understandings, some of them non-apocalyptic. It is not my intention to discuss here these various eschatologies: rather I shall examine one in particular, that is, the Seventh-day Adventist tradition, which, like many others, is apocalyptic, incorporating a cataclysmic culmination of history. I will attempt to relate this eschatological understanding to environmental attitudes held by its adherents.

Catherine Keller (1997) argued that popular Protestant views of heaven which incorporate a literalist apocalypticism tend to associate environmental concerns with futility and possibly paganism as well. Ecofeminist Rosemary Ruether (1992) was more blunt. Using Seventh-day Adventists as an example to support her position, she saw apocalypticism as a form of escapism in which its adherents not only imagine themselves to be safe from world destruction, but see world destruction as the very means by which they can escape.

Curry-Roper (1990) distinguished between several Protestant eschatological positions, and considered their implications for attitudes to environmental stewardship. Those that believe that the world is inevitably getting progressively worse see environmental problems as signs of the end and of Christ's return. Since heaven is to be the inheritance of believers, the present natural world is not seen to be of any consequence. Others see history as progressive: obedience to God's laws will restore nature to its previous Edenic state: the earth is the present and future home of humanity. A third possible group consists of those who see some partial restoration of the natural world before a future universal restoration when Christ returns.

The Seventh-day Adventist tradition most clearly fits within Curry-Roper's first group: heaven is to be the inheritance of the saints (although heaven will ultimately be transferred to a renewed earth), and at least the surface of this present Earth will be destroyed, including all life. Environmental deterioration is often regarded as a sign of the imminence

of Christ's return. Seventh-day Adventists anticipate a millennium during which the Earth will be desolate, inhabited only by Satan and his angels. It is believed that the saved, both resurrected and living, will be transported with a returned Jesus to a heavenly abode for the duration of the one thousand-year period, but will return from thence in the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, which is to be relocated to Earth at the end of this time. The millennium will be ushered in by the appearance of a literal lake of fire, into which the beast and the false prophet will be cast, and will be terminated by a lake of fire which will purge the entire planetary surface and consume the dragon and the lost who have been raised in the second resurrection. These views are drawn from Revelation 19–20, 2 Peter 3:5–10, 1 Thess 4:16–17, John 14:1–3, 1 Cor 15:20–23, as well as from certain Old Testament passages which refer to desolation. Sauter (1999) cited a 1986 study by Mojtabai which recalled that ". . . many engineers who were Seventh-day Adventists or who belonged to the Pentecostal movement did not have conscientious objections to working on the production of atomic bombs; they thought they were preparing the way for the second coming of Jesus Christ, which according to 'biblical information' would be preceded by an enormous global fire" (p xi).

Such anticipations might not be expected to generate special concern for that which is about to pass away, and soon. Indeed, this under-standing seems to exclude the non-human creation from God's redemption, with the human species providing the only continuity between the Old Earth and the New. However Paul suggested (Col 1:15–20) that all created things are reconciled to God through the shedding of Jesus' blood on the cross. He also declares, ". . . the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom 8:21). Miroslav Volf (2000) concluded that ". . . the eschatological transition must be ultimately understood as the final reconciliation of 'all things', grounded in the work of Christ the reconciler" (p 278), and Santmire (1985) has asked:

> Is the final aim of God, in [God's] governance of all things, to bring into being at the very end a glorified kingdom of spirits alone who, thus united with God, may contemplate [God] in perfect bliss, while as a precondition for their ecstasy all other creatures of nature must be left by God to fall away into eternal oblivion? Or is the aim of God . . . to communicate [God's] life in another way which calls forth at the very end new heavens and a new earth in which rightness dwells, a transfigured cosmos where peace is universally established between all creatures at last, in the midst of which is situated a glorious city of resurrected saints

who dwell in justice, blessed with all the resplendent fullness of the earth, and who continually call upon all creatures to join with them in their joyful praise of the one who is all in all? (pp 217–218).

There is indeed a promise of a New Earth, but if it has no effective continuity with the Old Earth, one might ask how, then, is that a reconciliation of all things, and how might the present creation look forward to that time with "eager longing" (Rom 8:19)? Polkinghorne (2000) maintained that there is both a continuity and a discontinuity between this world and the new creation, while Conradie (1999) has commented: " Christian hope for life beyond death maintains a typical tension between the continuity and discontinuity of this life and the life to come, my present body and my resurrected body, the old Jerusalem and the new Jerusalem, this earth and the new earth." For Polkinghorne, " . . . the new creation is not due to God's wiping the cosmic slate clean, and starting again. Instead, what is brought about is the divine redemptive transformation of the old creation." Moltmann (1996) reminded us to think of the unity of redemption and creation: " . . . according to Christian under-standing, the Redeemer is no other than the Creator . . . There are not two Gods, a Creator God and a Redeemer God. There is one God" (p 259). Thus Kehm (1992) argued, ". . . the logic of the biblical story requires that the work of God's redemption or salvation complete God's work of creation . . . the end or goal of God's saving action can only be the same as the end of God's action as Creator . . . In the biblical view, ultimate salvation means fulfilment for the whole creation, and it is impossible for humans to attain it without the coparticipation of the extrahuman creatures" (p 105).

Perhaps at this point it is worthwhile to note that scientists also predict an eventual doom for planet Earth, which is most likely to be consumed by an expanding but ultimately dying Sun. However this end will probably be long after the extinction of the human species and most other life as we know it. Despite this forecast, most scientists do not regard concern for the natural world as a futile pursuit, although the motivation for the concerns of some is the prospect of a damaged environment for humans. Scientists give no reassurance regarding the long-term prospects for humanity, and it would seem that if the New Earth is to have any physical reality, God's transforming intervention is a necessity. As Stoeger (2000) has written, the natural sciences provide us with no access to this transformed reality, and ". . . our human experience gives us only obscure, but nevertheless real, intimations and indications" (p20).

While Seventh-day Adventist eschatology forecasts a fiery destruction of life on Earth's surface, nevertheless

there have been and are occasional voices within the Seventh-day Adventist community calling for a greater level of concern for environmental matters both from a theological perspective and in practice. In 1982 Gary Longfellow, writing in the official Seventh-day Adventist journal, *Review and Herald*, argued that while God's environmental ethic was one of love, many Adventists had lost sight of this and had based their life styles and goals on a selfish-use ethic. He regretted that " instead of a love for the land . . . we measure the value of God's creation by its usefulness to us." Then he asked,""Are we condoning environmental destruction while believing that God will come and rescue us?" The following year Barry Casey, then a member of the theological faculty of Columbia Union College, Washington DC, made a plea on behalf of creation which warned against "short-chang[ing] the present by ignoring the destruction of the earth through a misguided apocalyptic other-worldliness," believing that "God's purposes for the world are inclusive of all reality, that they are not isolated for the 'remnant' who are saved but include the earth itself and ultimately the universe " (Casey 1983). Harper (1993) found Seventh-day Adventist theology to be saturated with this "other-worldly" eschatological view, which he believed was not necessarily wrong, but "need(ed) to better articulate God's relationship to the natural world". Alvin Kwiram (1993) admitted that some Seventh-day Adventists would argue that our apocalyptic view exempts us from responsibility for the creation, but asked if it was not appropriate to consider a new paradigm based on a different time-frame, suggesting that "a re-examination of our metaphors and our tradition in the context of environmental awareness would enlarge our understanding and broaden our vision". Adventist eco-feminist Sheryll Prinz-McMillan (1994) challenged Adventism to "re-examine eschatology, bringing into its scope all of creation . . . [and to] recenter humanity within creation and God's presence." Angel Rodriguez attempted to resolve the tension by suggesting that "the apocalyptic conflagration of the natural world is to be understood as an act of redemption which leads to the renewal of creation and not to its extinction." Thus the conflagration will destroy the wicked powers, which have no possibility of re-creation. "Not so with the natural world. The final conflagration is its liberation . . . Nature is not expecting a future participation in the destruction of the wicked but rather 'into the glorious freedom of the children of God'" (Rodriguez 1994, pp 5–15).

In early 2000, with Ed Parker, I conducted a modest survey of Seventh-day Adventists living at or near Avondale College, a tertiary

educational institution located on the east coast of New South Wales. The survey was intended to explore any connections between Seventh-day Adventist beliefs, especially with regard to end-time apocalypses, and concerns about environmental issues. The 164 respondents included members of two local church congregations, and academic staff and theology students at Avondale College. The survey instrument consisted of a questionnaire inviting responses to twelve statements on a Likert scale with five options ranging from disagree strongly to agree strongly. The following indications about the attitudes of this group of Seventh-day Adventists may be inferred from the results of the survey (percentage of respondents shown in brackets).

Christians should be concerned about the environment (86%). It is a matter of stewardship (83%). Nature is created by God and should be respected (96%).

However, a strong anthropocentric current is indicated by the belief (69%) that the natural environment has been provided largely for human benefit, and by the fact that 48% agreed that the Christian's environmental concerns arise mainly because of the connection between the environment and human welfare (36% disagreed). Despite the strong indication of a stewardship responsibility for Christians, 58% agreed that the Christian's environmental concerns reflect society at large rather than Christian teaching (only 25% disagreed).

Only 24% believed the Bible to be the actual word of God and that it should be read literally (31% if the College academic staff results are excluded). The alternative proposition – that the Bible is the inspired word of God but should not'*always* be read literally – drew 78% agreement. However, while only 24% believed the Bible should be read literally, 53% agreed that there would be grass-eating lions in the New Earth, indicating a literal reading of Isaiah 65:25 which, in describing the new heavens and the new earth which God promises to create, declares "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox." Twenty-four per cent agreed that the natural world was *not* included in the redemption provided by Jesus Christ, but 47% thought that it *would* be included – just a slightly smaller proportion than that which believed there would be grass-eating lions.

In view of the perceived links between apocalyptic eschatology and lack of environmental concern, the fact that ninety per cent of respondents did not think that environmental concern was pointless even if the Earth was to be cleansed by fire was unexpected. It is possible that some of the responses to the survey were coded rather than committed, meaning that the degree of apparent

sympathy or concern with environmental degradation may reflect what the respondents think ought to be rather than what actually is.

With these caveats in mind, it seems reasonable to suggest from this survey that holding to a literalist apocalyptic eschatology does not necessarily produce attitudes that are negative towards nature and the environment. Literalist eschatology is usually paired with literalist interpretations of Genesis creation narratives and at the present time, with "dominion" having been reinterpreted as "stewardship", at least in theory environmental concerns are on the agenda. Unfortunately, translation of theory into practice may be another matter. Alan Black's 1997 Australian study indicated that Biblical literalists have significantly lower rates of adoption of environmentally-protective behaviour than do people who hold a more liberal or secular interpretation of the Bible. This conclusion was based on assessment of such activities as choosing household products they think are better for the environment; reusing or recycling something rather than throwing it away; attending meetings or signing petitions aimed at protecting the environment, and contributing to an environmental organisation. "Because attitudes do not always correlate strongly with behaviour, one should not assume that information about the former is an adequate substitute for information about the latter" (Black 1997). In another Australian study, 'Tricia Blombery concluded that ". . . although Australians show a high level of concern for the environment, the majority are reluctant to make any personal sacrifices in order to protect it . . . Perversely, it is those most committed to the creation stories and the sacredness of nature as God's creation who take the least action and who are least willing to make personal sacrifices for the environment. However, they aren't much more reluctant than the total group. Although Australians show a great deal of concern for environment issues and accept collective responsibility for the remedy only the minority are prepared to put this concern into action." In other words, if the actions of Biblical literalists do not reflect much concern for the environment, their behaviour is not much worse than that of the population at large. For Seventh-day Adventists, some of the reluctance to become involved in practical environmental actions might arise from a suspicion that many other people who are involved with environmental concerns have associations with New Age movements or with pantheism.

One might conclude that the causes of the lack of practical environmental concern are much broader than religious ones. However this is not to say that religion might not become a powerful factor in generating such concern. In 1970 Francis Schaeffer

expressed this hope: ". . . a truly biblical Christianity has a real answer to the ecological crisis . . .it offers the hope here and now of substantial healing in nature of some of the results of the Fall." "It is the biblical view of nature that gives nature a value *in itself* . . . because God made it . . . this is the true Christian mentality . . . What God has made, I, who am also a creature, must not despise." Schaeffer further urged that ". . . the Church ought to be a 'pilot plant' . . . exhibiting . . . through individual attitudes and the Christian community's attitude . . . that in this present life man can exercise dominion over nature without being destructive" (Schaeffer 1970, pp 81–82).

Why do many Seventh-day Adventists consider that the natural environment is worth worrying about even though most believe it is slated for incineration? Some possible factors include the following:

- Caring for the environment may be seen as a test of stewardship, along the lines of the parable of the talents. Many think in terms of the directive, "occupy 'til I come".
- Concern for the health of the environment is logically connected with health of body, mind and spirit, and caring for the body is seen as an issue of stewardship. Seventh-day Adventists are possibly best known for their health emphasis. (They are responsible for changing the breakfast habits of millions of Australians, New Zealanders and Americans - the cereal Weet-Bix is made by a Seventh-day Adventist-operated company, and Kellogg was once a Seventh-day Adventist). This health emphasis has followed in part from their denying the dualist notion of an immortal soul in a mortal body, and their appreciation of the holistic nature of humans.
- Perhaps, too, there is a diminished sense of the imminence of the second coming of Christ and attendant cataclysmic events: maybe the world will go on for longer than was thought, so there is some point to caring for the natural environment..

Thus it would seem that Seventh-day Adventists (at least in the western world), despite their apocalyptic eschatology, in theory view the non-human Creation as worthy of concern and consideration. Some Adventists' beliefs are logically conducive to this concern, but there is still the tension, already-mentioned, existing "between the continuity and discontinuity of this life and the life to come . . . this earth and the new earth" (Conradie 1999). Forty-seven per cent of the survey respondents agreed that the natural world *would* be included in the redemption provided by Jesus Christ, which implies some continuity between old and new. How this might be in the context of Seventh-day Adventist escha-

tology has not been explored in any depth, but those lions will be there, even if they do eat straw! "If that is the case, lionhood will have also to share in the dialectic of eschatological continuity and discontinuity" (Polkinghorne 2002, p203).

**Questions for Discussion**

1 Do our personal beliefs concerning Earth's future influence how we live on the Earth now?

2 Should there be and is there a noticeable difference in our behaviour with regard to God's creation and environmental issues and that of non-Christians in our society?

3 Is a lion that eats a diet of grass still a lion? What changes would be required in the lion (consider, for example, dentition and digestive tract, instinctive behaviour)?

4 Are passages such as Isaiah 65:17–25 better understood as metaphor, meaning that the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, will ultimately find peace together?

5 Could it be that the ecology of the New Earth is to be so radically different from the present that there can be no effective continuity between the Old and the New? (For example, death and recycling are integral components of the present scheme of things.)

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**The Author**

Howard Fisher is currently Senior Lecturer in Geography at Avondale College, PO Box 19, Cooranbong NSW 2265 Australia.

Howard.Fisher@avondale.edu.au