The Impact of Anthropocentrism on Christian Environmentalism

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This paper will discuss the effects of anthropocentrism in Christian theology, doctrine, and environmentalism. The development and history of Christian environmentalism will be examined, with emphasis on the time since the 1960s, when environmentalism came to the forefront in the Western world. Alternative interpretations and worldviews, mainly ecocentrism and biocentrism, will be considered and compared to the prevalent anthropocentric view. I will close with a presentation of two possible means for developing a Christian ecological theology without anthropocentrism. An environmental position most coherent with Christian principles will be left open to the reader; my purpose is to examine the impact of anthropocentrism and to present alternatives that have the potential to create a Christian ethic which values and supports environmental efforts more effectively and purposefully than currently done.

Visiting a typical American Christian church on a Sunday morning, one might expect a sermon on spiritual disciplines, politics, and even personal finances. But chances are that one would not typically hear a sermon on environmentalism or the interconnectedness of God, nature, and man; most pastors have likely not thought much about such matters, much less preached a sermon on the topics. Yet if Christianity applies to all parts of human life, as most Christians would agree, why should there not be sermons on how to view and respect the earth? Why has the Christian church as a whole been largely absent from the discussion on environmental issues?

An investigation into the influence of one belief, anthropocentrism, on Christian theology may help explain these questions. To begin this investigation, anthropocentrism must be defined and contrasted with two other important viewpoints – ecocentrism and biocentrism. Then, we will examine anthropocentrism within Christian doctrine and how this has affected the formation of Christian ecological theology and how Christians think and act towards the environment in light of their faith. We will see that the rise of the environmentalism movement in the United States demanded a response from Christians, but that the resulting responses were still highly anthropocentric and resulted in relatively little change in Christian involvement in environmental efforts. Although no concrete conclusion will be reached, we will end by exploring two ways in which Christians could reframe their ecological outlook that could serve as promising alternatives to the traditional anthropocentric view of nature.

Anthropocentrism Defined

Since anthropocentrism is central to this discussion, we will begin with an explanation of anthropocentrism as a belief and social construct, and then to examine where it is embedded within traditional Christian doctrine and how this could affect an ecological theology developed from the Christian perspective. By dictionary definition (Merriam-Webster's), anthropocentrism is the belief that humans are the superior beings on earth or in the

universe; to put it more crudely, the world does indeed revolve around humankind. An anthropocentric view, then, is one that evaluates the universe by human standards and values. Anthropocentrism is not in itself a complete belief system, but rather a view that can be seen interwoven throughout many different worldviews and cultures. To a certain extent, all human thinking is naturally anthropocentric, and this should not come as a surprise. Human values and experiences are the only basis humankind has by which to measure and understand the universe around them, and it is very difficult, if not impossible, to separate oneself from ones' own experiences and values. Thus it is reasonable to conclude that any human worldview must be somewhat anthropocentric, that everyone builds their way of thinking starting from a level of "default anthropocentrism."[1]

However, the component of anthropocentrism that will be most relevant for this paper is the idea that humankind is the most significant entity in the universe, which is not impossible to separate from one's thinking. This is what Martinelli refers to as "qualitative anthropocentrism" and "quantitative anthropocentrism," or the level of anthropocentric reasoning that seeks out the differences between humankind and other species, and seeks to create a hierarchy based on those differences.[2] There is a social aspect to this level of anthropocentrism – it gives humankind a sense of group identity as opposed to other groups (or species), which may offer insight into why Western culture is so rich in anthropocentric thought.[3]

Alternatives to Anthropocentrism

Before moving into the identification of anthropocentrism within Christianity, some alternatives to anthropocentrism must be explained. As the effects of human degradation of the earth have come to the forefront of politics and culture with the growth of the environmentalist movement, an entire field of study, environmental ethics, has developed from the need to identify and categorize the ethical and philosophical roots of the different beliefs humans have regarding their relationship to the earth.

Joseph DesJardins introduces two views that will be of interest to this discussion for comparison against anthropocentrism: ecocentrism and biocentrism. Ecocentrism is the belief that all of nature, both biotic and abiotic components, has intrinsic value and interconnectedness. No one species is superior or has higher moral status than another. The deep ecology movement, which is prominent among environmentalists and stems from ecocentrism, is characterized best by the purpose of "rejecting the 'man-in-environment image' in favor of a more holistic and non-anthropocentric approach."[4] A key point of deep ecology is that humans do not have the right to interfere in nature outside of satisfying vital needs.

The second view to consider in opposition to anthropocentrism is biocentrism. Any biocentric ethic is one that considers all living beings to be intrinsically valuable. Notice that this is slightly different from ecocentrism, which also ascribes inherent worth to non-living entities. Because all living beings have inherent worth, a respect for nature becomes the most important moral determinant, according to Paul Taylor, a biocentric ethicist.[5] Even from these brief descriptions of biocentrism

[1] Martinelli, 2008, p. 80
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid. pp. 80-81
[4] DesJardins, 1993, p. 215
[5] Ibid. p. 153

and ecocentrism, it is plain that they are radically different from anthropocentrism.

Anthropocentrism in Traditional Christianity

Now, keeping our basic, but sufficient, understanding of anthropocentrism in mind, we will see, upon examination, that anthropocentrism is deeply embedded within the major traditional teachings of Christianity. It is important to note that I will make some generalizations here for the sake of brevity; some branches of Christianity may not fully ascribe to all or even some of the following beliefs as part of their doctrine. However, they are indisputably teachings across the majority of denominations and the history of Christianity. Some of Christian doctrine is quite obviously anthropocentric, but other parts require consideration of their implications to understand their anthropocentricity.

In one of the biblical creation accounts, Genesis 1:27, provides the foundation for two key anthropocentric beliefs among Christians: the doctrine of *imago dei* and the doctrine of dominion over creation. The belief that humans have God-given dominion over creation is clearly anthropocentric – all of nature is under the authority of humankind according to this view. The doctrine of *imago dei* further establishes this special, elevated status of humanity. No other species is specifically said to be made in the likeness of God; this reinforces the idea that humankind is superior to the rest of creation. How to interpret what exactly "dominion" means has been a source of controversy, but the general consensus in Christianity throughout history has been that humans have the right to use nature to meet their needs, and that this is part of nature's intended purpose.[6] The main debate among theologians has been over how Christians should use natural resources, not calling into question the belief that they are entitled to do so.[7] In fact, this idea of dominion over nature is also an implication of anthropocentrism outside of Christianity. If humanity is the most important species, we automatically have the authority to use nature for our own benefit. Nature has instrumental value, but is not guaranteed intrinsic value.[8]

Another Christian idea that has anthropocentric implications is the traditional interpretation of the biblical view of the wilderness and land.[9] One of the main sagas of the Old Testament is the journey to the Promised Land, during which the Israelites are sent into the wilderness for forty years as punishment, and they suffer greatly during this time. The wilderness is their enemy against whom they struggle for survival. Similarly, in the New Testament, Jesus spends forty days in the wilderness and this is where he endures great temptation. There are many other stories in Scripture which portray a similar scenario – nature against man, as a threat to man. This view of the wilderness is not directly anthropocentric, but one can see where it contributes to the belief that man is set apart from and above nature.

One additional major tenant of Christian doctrine that has become tinged with anthropocentrism is that of salvation and redemption from sin. There is a huge emphasis on the salvation of mankind, most clearly in modern evangelical theology, but hearkening back to the rise of Protestantism during the Reformation age.[10] Very little is taught regarding the redemption of any other part of creation, apart from the apocalyptic teachings that the earth will be destroyed

[6] Ibid. pp. 43, 45
[7] Santmire, 1985, pp. 4-5
[8] Op. cit. ref. 1, p. 79
[9] Op. cit. ref. 4, p. 155
[10] Op. cit. ref. 7, pp. 122-123

and a new earth will be created. Additionally, in order to achieve salvation and restore a relationship with God, traditional doctrine paints the picture of ascent – that humans must rely on Jesus to rise above this fallen world to reach harmony with God. The world is repeatedly referred to as sinful, fallen, dark, and not of God. This has translated to an underlying, and perhaps unrealized, attitude of superiority or apathy towards nature. The earth may have purpose, beauty, and usefulness, but ultimately it is not the true home for humans and not as important as the salvation of souls. These are only a few examples of the many aspects of Christian doctrine that are saturated with an anthropocentric perspective.

Having established the anthropocentrism ingrained in Christianity, the focus now turns to how this anthropocentrism has influenced Christian ecological theology and involvement in environmentalism. To begin this examination, it will be helpful to look at how Christians in the past have thought about nature. Developing an ecological theology has not been a priority for many church leaders and prominent Christian thinkers, but most of their teachings, ideas, and theologies have clear implications about how to view nature. Paul Santmire explores the ecological motifs in the teachings of several significant Christian leaders throughout the history of the church; outlining his work will be particularly worthwhile to this discussion and to understanding the place that nature has been given in Christian theology over time.[11]

A Brief History of the Development of Christian Ecological Theory

Santmire proposes that the theologies of every Christian leader employs one of two motifs, or themes: the spiritual motif or the ecological motif. These motifs depend on which view the Christian holds regarding the relationships between God, nature, and man. The three main views, or metaphors, of these relationships are the metaphors of ascent, fecundity, and migration to the good land.[12] The metaphor of ascent and the metaphor of fecundity both propose that in order to reach true communion with God, humankind must rise above the world, similar to climbing a mountain and achieving a grander and higher perspective. However, they differ in that in the metaphor of ascent, man leaves nature and the world behind completely in his ascension, implying that God is not in the world or nature, but in the metaphor of fecundity, the purpose of reaching this higher perspective is to realize that God is within the earth and to find one's solidarity with earth and God together. The metaphor of fecundity aligns more closely with the metaphor of migration to a good land, which is the idea that humans are connected and rooted to the earth, and although they are on a journey to a better land (communion with God), they do not have to ascend to reach the destination because God is within nature. In fact, they cannot ascend, as humankind is so closely intertwined with nature. If one holds to the metaphors of migration to a good land or fecundity, this will lead them to the ecological motif, or the theme of finding God and his goodness all throughout creation, and looking to the restoration of the earth as well as humankind. The metaphor of ascent leads to the spiritual motif, which emphasizes rising above the fallen world to achieve harmony with God. Nature is not necessarily going to be redeemed as man will, and in most cases, theologians who employ the spiritual motif ascribe more instrumental value than intrinsic value to nature and believe it will simply cease to exist following the return of

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid. pp. 14-16

Christ and the redemption of humankind. This focus on the redemption of humankind and desire to detach from the world is undoubtedly anthropocentric.

After establishing these motifs and metaphors, Santmire gives a thorough description of the theology and life of several prominent Christian figures, beginning in the days of the early church with Irenaeus and Origen, and ending with Kierkegaard and moving into the twentieth century, and points out the motif visible in their theologies.[13] With the notable exceptions of St. Augustine and St. Francis of Assisi (and Irenaeus, somewhat), the spiritual motif dominates the theologies of these leaders, and therefore so does anthropocentrism, to an extent. Especially after the Protestant Reformation, with the establishment of the Protestant work ethic and the emphasis on salvation, nature and earth are not prevailing themes among Christian teachings. Cultural movements also played a role in shaping their ideas; for example, by the time of Kant, the Enlightenment had cultivated a mechanical view of nature that completely clashes with an ecological motif, and Kant.[14] The further secularization of nature in Western thought continued into the twenty-first century, until the environmentalism movement began, and this enabled Christian theology to largely omit any significant ecological component.[15]

The 1960s marked the advent of the modern environmentalist movement in the Western world, and particularly in the United States. American Christians and churches were generally uninvolved in this new movement, but as the movement grew and its proponents pointed to Christianity as an anti-environmental religion, churches and Christians began to respond in different ways. One hugely influential criticism that created much controversy, but also led to the increased scholarly interest in religious environmentalism, was Lynn White's 1967 essay.[16] White, who was himself a Christian, identifies Judeo-Christian religion as the culprit for the ecological crisis - the careless use and abuse of the earth by humans that had led to the degradation of earth and its biodiversity.[17] His logic is not unlike Santmire's; the way humans view themselves in relation to the world around them determines their ecological thought, and that Christianity was too focused on humanity – too anthropocentric. His driving point was that in order to produce change, the religious thinking about the earth and environment must be restructured. Essentially, "White had laid down a gauntlet; theological orthodoxy and environmental progress were said to be at odds."[18] Christians began to respond to the negative backlash from White's article and the growing societal prejudices against Judeo-Christian religion for being anti-environmental.

Initially, the response was only marginal. Some churches proclaimed an ecological commitment, but not much happened outside of that to actually change Christian perception and involvement in environmentalism. Scholars and theologians began to debate if it was necessary and how to reframe Christian doctrine to be more environmentally-minded, sociologists sought to test White's claim that religion directly affected environmental action (which they never could conclusively provide evidence for), and others simply agreed that Judeo-Christian religion is anti-environmental.[19] More practical and less scholarly responses, such as calls to action

[13] Ibid. chapters III-VII
[14] Ibid. p. 135
[15] Ibid. pp. 141-142
[16] White, 1967
[17] Ibid. pp. 1206-1207
[18] Berry, 2013, p. 455
[19] Ibid. p. 456

from the Pope or the foundation of Christian environmental organizations such as Au Sable Institute and the Evangelical Environmental Network, did not come about until the 1980s-2000s.[20]

As the green movement continued to grow across the country and more Christians engaged with its ideas, three schools of ecological Christian thought developed, which still characterize American Christian mindsets today: Christian stewardship, eco-justice, and creation spirituality which Laurel Kerns describes .[21] Christian stewardship is the most anthropocentric of the three; it maintains that humans are the pinnacle beings in creation, and that they have been charged by God to care for nature and use it wisely. This view comes directly from the doctrine of dominion over nature that was discussed earlier, although there is an added element of responsible use of natural resources. The eco-justice theory is also anthropocentric, but in a less obvious manner. Eco-justice is focused on a sustainable use of natural resources that ensures fair distribution across all humankind. It prioritizes environmental welfare more so than stewardship, but still for the purpose of human welfare. The third view, creation spirituality, is the most liberal and the least popular and can be classified as biocentric rather than anthropocentric. Creation spiritualists believe that humans are not superior to the rest of creation and should work to sustain the whole of nature.[22] The state of Christian ecological theology today can be seen through these three beliefs, two of which are clearly anthropocentric.

Although Christians have become somewhat involved in environmental efforts, the anti-environmental reputation of Christianity in mainstream society remains, and churches continue to mostly ignore environmental concerns in their ministry and teachings. New-Age spirituality, indigenous religions, and Eastern religions are considered the more environmentally-inclined religions.[23] These assumptions and reputations are not completely false. One study conducted among U.S. businesses in 2013 found that U.S. firms based in regions that are highly religious (predominantly Christian) were much less likely to make pro-environmental management decisions.[24] Although Christian stewardship, eco-justice, and creation spirituality are emerging ideas in American Christianity, they are not yet translating into daily life practices for many of its followers. Whether or not anthropocentric Christianity is completely to blame for this reality may be impossible to ascertain, but the anthropocentric trend certainly has had a significant influence over centuries of Christian theological evolution. In order for Christianity to embrace a more environmentally-promising mindset, there may need to be a shift in theology and where the centricity lies.

Reforming Christian Ecological Theology: Santmire

To accomplish a less anthropocentric Christian ecological theology, there are two plausible options: reinterpret Scripture and reframe doctrine in light of new interpretation, or set out to establish a Christian ecological theology outside of Scripture. Consideration of the first option brings us back to Santmire, who proposes that an ecological reading of the Bible is possible and may lead to a more balanced and less anthropocentric ecological theology. Looking at the Old Testament, he points to the importance of the land, especially in the book of Deuteronomy.[25]

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[20] Ibid. 2013, p. 459
[21] Kearns, 1996, p. 57
[22] Ibid. p. 60-61
[23] Op. cit. ref. 7, p. 1
[24] Cui, et. al, 2015, p. 226
[25] Op. cit. ref. 7, p. 190

The land does not belong to Israel, but is a gift from God and a sign of his faithfulness to the Israelites, and God is the provider of the fertility of the land and continuing cycles of nature. The land is strongly tied to the identity of Israel, and this has theological implications, as Santmire notes: "Likewise, as Israel could not think of itself apart from the land, neither could it finally think of human creatures in general apart from earth…the very self, the *naphesh*, permeates the land."[26] He also explores the beliefs of the Israelites and Psalmists that saw God as the creator of earth who has a relationship with earth apart from humanity. Before they knew of him as Creator or Redeemer, He was the God who had power over all nature and used that power throughout the earth to display his majesty, not just to deliver his people.[27] Both humankind and nature together are portrayed worshipping God together in the Psalms, and some Psalms, such as Psalm 29 and 104, praise God or his glory in ruling over and caring for nature, with no focus on humankind whatsoever.[28] Prophets referring to apocalyptic times frequently foretold of the restoration of the land, not just man. This ecological reading reveals themes that align with the metaphor of fecundity and provides a theocentric ecological perspective, rather than an anthropocentric. When seeing the grander ways in which God exercises his power and moves throughout the entire creation, the traditional interpretations appear much narrower.

In the New Testament, the prophetic-apocalyptic renewal of all creation is a continuing theme, especially in Paul's works, which are filled with references to the complete redemption of all things and all people through Christ. He emphasizes the inclusion of "all things," not just humans, being restored to perfection and unity with God in several passages, most notably in 1 Corinthians 15.[29] Jesus also becomes "an ecological figure as well as an eschatological figure," because his identity as son of God means he is not only the God of people, but "also the Maker of Heaven and Earth, the gracious and powerful Creator and Consummator of the whole creation."[30] Accordingly, we see Jesus speak of the new heaven and new earth, and of how God cares for each part of creation. Jesus represents God descending not only to his people, but to his earth. Using ecological lenses, the Bible has many promising ideas and references to nature that suggest a less anthropocentric view of the earth as more than just the backdrop for the human story.

Reforming Christian Ecological Theology: Nash

The second option, which rejects the notion that the Bible should be used to establish an environmental position, is best characterized by the ideas of James Nash, a Christian ecologist and ethicist.[31] Nash argues that the Bible as a whole is far too ambiguous to be able to develop any semblance of a concrete ecological theology.[32] Santmire echoes this sentiment several times throughout his book, but believes the ambiguity lies more within how Christian theology developed and how Scripture and classical Christian thought has been interpreted, rather than within Scripture itself.[33] To Nash, it is almost ridiculous to attempt to form a moral ecological view from the Bible. It is "a continuing source of illumination, inspiration, and empowerment, but it should never be asked to perform

[26] Ibid. p. 191
[27] Ibid. pp. 191-192
[28] Ibid. p. 195
[29] Ibid. p. 202
[30] Ibid. p. 201
[31] Nash, 2009
[32] Ibid. p. 225
[33] Op. cit. ref. 7, p. 7-9, 13-14, 188-189

tricks that are beyond its powers and dignity."[34] The ambiguity and contradictions within the Bible does not trouble Nash, what troubles him is the fact that Christians have attempted to find authoritative ecological doctrine from a text that cannot, in his opinion, be used for such a purpose.

To develop an ecological theology, Nash supports the use of Christian principles that come from the Bible, such as love and justice. If love guides Christian action towards the environment, they will treat it with care and respect. Instead of relying on Psalms and other passages that, when taken together, often seem to present conflicting views of nature and the wilderness, he turns to simple verses such as Psalm 145:9 – "The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made."[35] The love and compassion God has for his creation should be echoed by his followers. He claims that this is how most moral issues facing Christians today should be handled, as the Bible contains a variety of moral stances and perspectives that are far too diverse to be used to establish firm answers and does not contain sufficient content for complete development of an ethical position. Briefly put, "'Christian ethics is not synonymous with biblical ethics.'"[36]

Conclusion

There are, of course, different challenges and criticisms for both of these options. However, it is worth considering, especially in light of the current environmental issues facing our society today, how the effects of anthropocentric thought have narrowed or led astray Christian ecological theology.

Anthropocentrism is not necessarily a negative force, but its far-reaching implications must be realized and kept in check. One of the ways to accomplish this is to engage with ideas outside of anthropocentrism, as we have done in this discussion, in hopes of finding a balanced understanding of the relationships between humankind, the earth, and God.

Perhaps our Sunday morning sermons should sometimes remind us that humans are not the axis around which the world turns, but that we have a role to play in the grand scheme of the universe that requires more from us than apathy.

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[34] Op. cit. ref. 31, p. 225
[35] Ibid. p. 221
[36] Ibid. p. 226

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