

God's Grandeur:
The Church in the Economy of Creation
By
Ragan Sutterfield

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INTRODUCTION

Our age has been one of denial. Central to this denial has been a rejection of our creatureliness, our dependence upon, and membership within creation. Embracing a culture of exploitation and consumption, we have come to understand ourselves as the masters of creation rather than its members, independent of God's grace and life-sustaining gifts. Christianity possesses the resources to name and correct this denial, but rather than offer a prophetic voice against the idolatry of our age, the church has all too often been mute, or worse, joined its voice with the cacophony.

It is commonplace among environmentalists to blame Christianity for the ecological crisis. They argue, for example, that theological concepts, such as the idea that humans are *imago dei* (image of God), or that we have been given dominion, have created the cultural framework for the Western exploitation of nature. These assumptions are theologically naïve, yet they bear within themselves a kernel of truth, for churches have, more often than not, been willing to live up to them. The time has come for Christians to critically rethink some of these assumptions. We must look at the scriptures and think carefully about what creation is theologically, and what our role is as members within it. Only then can we begin to understand how the Church might extend Christ's reconciling Kingdom to the whole of the cosmos and respond to a political economy that has no reference beyond itself, and thus rejects the world as God's creation.

CREATION: BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

The passage most often referred to in discussions of the human role in creation is Genesis 1:26-29. In this passage humankind is created in the image of God and given dominion over the earth, "to fill the earth and subdue it." The notion "image of God" is usually taken to mean that humans are given a special make up, or kind of being, not available to other animals. Humans have a soul, for example, or a rational mind. Yet, after

several thousand years of trying to establish what exactly is different about human beings we are rather at a loss. Perhaps we have been asking the wrong questions. Theologians like Stanley Hauerwas and John Berkman have suggested that the most significant theological difference between humans and animals lies not in a unique faculty, but rather in a unique purpose. This is a difference in vocation, rather than being. But what is this vocation? The complementary creation story, told in Genesis 2, suggests an answer.

In Genesis 2:5-25 the story of man's creation is repeated, in more detail and from a different perspective than Genesis 1. Man is formed from the soil and given God's life-breath. The word for soil here is the Hebrew *adama*, which is a technical word meaning not merely soil, but arable or agricultural soil. The name *adam* for man is derived from this word *adama*. It has been translated variously as "human" from "humus" or "earthling" from "earth." But as the Old Testament scholar Theodore Hiebert points out, if we take the precise meaning of *adama* seriously, a more accurate translation of *adam* would be 'farmer.'

This is particularly important to consider when we look at Genesis 2:15. The Lord takes Adam and puts him in the garden "to till it and keep it." The Hebrew word *abad*, for "till," could also be translated "serve." We could then say that man was put in the garden "to serve it and keep it." Thus, the "dominion" of Genesis 1 should be considered in relation to the "serve" of Genesis 2. Together they give us a full picture of the human vocation.

It is also important to note that humankind was not given its own day in the creation narrative. Adam and Eve were created on the same day as the other animals. Creation was not completed with the making of humankind, but rather was finished on the seventh day with the Sabbath rest. "Just as heaven and earth were created in six days," says Rabbi Abraham Heschel, "*menuha* was created on the Sabbath." *Menuha* is the Hebrew word for rest, but it suggests much more than the mere cessation of labor. It is something positive, something that is

created. *Menuha* could be described as stillness, peace, and harmony--an active pleasure and enjoyment in what God has created, a final step in the completion of the created order. Part of our being creatures then must be the celebration of this rest. It is a rest that God grants to the land and animals as well as humankind. It is a time that reminds us of the ultimate futility of our work apart from our dependence upon and recognition of God's gifts. The Sabbath is a day that helps break humankind of the belief that we are at the center of the universe. It was this day that crowned creation—a time rather than a thing.

This perspective is also echoed in the book of Job. Toward the end of the book, when Job is at a loss to explain his misfortune, God speaks to him from a whirlwind. God poses a long series of questions to Job, recounting God's care for and interest in all of creation: "Who has cut a channel for the torrent of rain, to bring rain on a land where no one lives, on the desert which is empty of human life..?" (Job 38:25-26); "Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food?" (Job 38:41); "Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?" (Job 39:1). Job is forced to see that God cannot be contained by Job's desires. God's care extends to all of creation, to the deserts where no human lives and to the ravens that serve no human purpose—humanity is only a part of the whole created order.

Our being creatures ties us morally to the whole of creation. In the fall and salvation of humankind, we see the fate of humanity tied closely to that of the entire cosmos, from the curse in the Garden to the coming of the New Jerusalem. With the fall the soil is cursed because of the sin of Adam. And in the new Adam creation is reconciled to God. As humankind falls and is redeemed, so creation falls and is redeemed. Humankind cannot be separated from the creation of which we are a part. Our fates are intertwined. This is seen throughout scripture.

The Old Testament prophetic literature emphasizes this point constantly. In Jonah, for instance, the animals of Nineveh are required to participate in a penitential fast and to wear

sackcloth (Jonah 3:7-8). When Jonah is chided by God for his selfishness, God says, “should I not be concerned with Nineveh. . . in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people. . . and also many animals?” In Hosea, God promises to make a covenant between Israel and the “wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground” (Hosea 2:18). In Isaiah 11, the Messiah reconciles the entire creation, not just humanity, to God’s peaceable kingdom.

The New Testament makes a similar point in its treatment of the reconciliation accomplished through the incarnation and death of Christ. Christ is the person through whom creation exists and for whom it exists, as we are told in Colossians, “all things have been created through him and for him” (1:16). It is this creation perfected in Christ that is God’s supreme work. When John sees the throne room of heaven, it is for creation that God is praised as the twenty-four elders sing, “You are worthy, our Lord and God...for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created” (Rev. 4:11).

When we understand creation as God’s supreme work, we can then understand his desire to reconcile an alienated creation to himself by the sacrificial gift of his son. He sent his son to enter that world of which he was the frame “to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:15-20). Christ is both the divine logos and the new Adam. In him all things find their true place and order, and through his death all things are reconciled to God.

This reconciliation finds its witness in the world through the revelation of Christ’s Church. “Creation,” Paul tells us, “waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God” (Rom. 8:19). The creation, put to futility and chaos through the fall of humanity, “itself will be set from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21). Christ’s restoration of humanity through the church will also be the restoration of creation.

In the picture of the fulfillment of Christ’s rule of earth in the book of Revelation, we catch a glimpse of this restored

creation. The New Jerusalem is envisioned as a garden city with a river of living water flowing through it. Along the river's banks grows the tree of life abundant with fruit and medicinal leaves for the healing of the nations (Rev. 22:2). When Christ comes to "make all things new" creation will finally live according to the order and flourishing that God intended.

From the Old Testament to the New the scriptures bear witness to the integrity of creation, linked in both fall and redemption. Throughout the biblical witness we are reminded that it is God who sustains the world and that it is in relation to God that the world discovers its true end and purpose. It is to this witness that we must return if we are to live faithfully in a world that denies creation.

THE IMMANENT ECONOMY: ALIENATION AND THE DENIAL OF TRANSCENDENCE

That the earth is the Lord's and sustained by his life-giving breath seems strange to those of us who live in advanced capitalist economies. Instead of seeing "creation" as a gift to be cared for and nurtured, we have learned to see "nature" as raw material for our limitless exploitation. Nature for us is a resource to be mined for human ends, with no value beyond that given it by human markets and use. Furthermore, it is a resource from which most of us are alienated. For example, I write on a desk made of wood harvested from a forest about which I know nothing, and most of us eat food without knowing, or even being able to learn, where it was raised.

We might call this dominant economy, which exploits nature and alienates us from it, an immanent economy or an economy of immanent value. Before we consider what an economy of transcendent value, an economy of creation, might look like, it is important that we understand the character of the immanent economy. Put simply, the immanent economy is an economy that denies the transcendent values and the limits that rightly shape our lives as creatures and how we use and care for the gift of creation.

The immanent economy is marked by a denial of cultural,

spatial, natural, and physical limits. Modern science, which has always been an ally of the immanent economy, began with a denial of limits. While science was aimed at understanding the world as it was in itself, it also understood that this specific knowledge of nature held the possibility of altering what had previously been considered unalterable. When Francis Bacon famously declared “knowledge is power,” this is part of what he meant. The very birth of modern science was aimed at the overcoming of natural limits. For example, Rene Descartes, a thinker implicated in the rise of modern science, once wrote that he hoped his work might foster the scientific advances necessary to prevent his own death.

This denial of limits clearly underwrites capitalist economics. Adam Smith argued that wealth is created through the continual conversion of luxuries into necessities. Civilized people simply need more for happiness than savages. This implies that human nature’s acquisitive desire, the desire for more, should have no limits. The result of such an economy is that life must then be lived on an ever larger scale, until we end up with the contemporary situation, in which most modern Americans consume as individuals what four generations ago could have sustained several families. Such growth is unsustainable and we know it. But rather than moderate our own consumption, we sponsor population control programs in “less developed” nations to ensure that the earth’s resources are not overburdened--and this to the applause of many “environmentalists.”

In order to keep pace with our indulgence, nature itself must be altered to become more productive. Genetic engineering is used to create more efficient crops, such as Monsanto’s Round-up Ready TM soybeans and cotton, which allow for the more intensive use of pesticides. With chemical fertilizers the Sabbath rest of land is unnecessary. It can be made continually productive so long as large amounts of expensive fertilizers are applied to the land. These practices leave the soil packed, kill many of the micro-organisms that maintain healthy soil, and damage local watersheds through

chemical runoff. Some Amish farmers who have purchased farms that were previously under industrial “cultivation” say that it takes them nearly ten years to return the soil to health. Absent from the immanent economy is any vision of cultivation of the land that works in balance with the local economy of creation.

This economy that denies limits alienates people from the products that they consume. Most of our food comes to us plastic-wrapped in grocery stores. We are left without any knowledge of where or under what conditions it was grown. Thus, we consume meat with no thought for the animal from which it comes or the process by which that animal was raised or slaughtered. Likewise, the vegetables we consume are grown and harvested under conditions we know nothing about, usually hundreds or thousands of miles a way from where we live. (It is estimated that most food travels nearly 1500 miles before it reaches the average person’s dinner plate) Not only is such a food system unsafe, but it also makes caring for the land upon which we are dependent nearly impossible, for it is organized in such a way as to make thinking about food as anything other than a consumer good incredibly difficult.

The immanent economy has also alienated people from the land. At one time nearly half the population of the United States was involved directly in food production. This required them to be deeply attentive to the natural processes around them and it fostered a deep awareness of our basic dependence upon the soil. But with the increased use of large farm machinery, synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, and unfair markets, fewer people have been able to farm. Large agricultural monopolies such as Tyson, BPI, and Cargill are able to control prices and keep them artificially low, so that small, individual farmers are unable to compete. It is now nearly impossible for small farmers to survive without government subsidies or off-farm jobs. Farms that were once cared for by families for generations are now owned by the bank or absorbed into industrial farms of several thousand acres. This has contributed to a shift in population from the country to the city, and in the process it has

created a loss of the kinds of knowledge necessary to care for particular places. With the loss of family farmers and the rural churches they attended, we are losing the best resource the Church has for carrying out its vocation of service in Creation.

This alienation from the land is not merely a matter of a loss of connection to the rural areas that produce so much of what our lives depend upon. It is also a matter of mobility. It is rare anymore to find anyone who lives in the same community in which she was raised. People move from place to place for education and work. This constant movement keeps us from knowing about our local places, and so limits our ability to care for them. If you do not know where your local watershed is, then you cannot be effective in protecting it. If you do not know the sorts of animals that live in your area, then you will not know whether or when they are threatened.

In a related way, the immanent economy alienates people from each other. The same mobility that keeps us from building relations with the land hinders relations with other people. Christians are called to love our neighbors and to exercise hospitality. But if we are constantly moving from place to place, following the market, it is more difficult to build relations with or even recognize people as neighbors. Instead, everyone is a stranger, and relations are superficial and fleeting—and this even in most Christian churches

To summarize, the immanent economy exists in denial of both nature as creation and the values and limits established by the Creator. It denies any value higher or other than that of the market. It denies the integrity of creation by separating the dominion of Genesis 1 from the service of Genesis 2. How might the Church offer an alternative to the immanent economy, bearing witness to the economy of creation that understands human dominion of that creation in terms of service to God?

CREATION AND THE TASK OF THE CHURCH

The beginning of such a witness is this: we must live according to an economy that sees the connections among all things. In such an economy the fall of a sparrow would be a significant

event. Such an economy is both too complex for human minds to understand completely and too real for them to ignore. It is an economy that harbors harsh penalties for those who would presume upon it. The Kingdom of God is such an economy. And it is an economy that can be made intelligible only through the lives of the people of that Kingdom—the Church.

The Church is that community that reminds a world that denies Creation that the world is nonetheless God's creature. In our weekly worship we are called to remember the true end of our efforts—not the fulfillment of human goals or the provision of human needs, but the service and worship of God (Matthew 6:31-33). In being reminded of this basic task, we are also reminded that it is a task that we share with the whole of creation—that the original creation was a community of beings aimed at the glory of God and that the restoration of that community is tied up with the coming of the Kingdom (Isaiah 11; Romans 8:19-23).

It follows that the thwarting of creation through exploitation and denial is the thwarting of the worship of God. Such transgression is grave and is a form of idolatry. And yet, it is also idolatrous to say that creation is valuable for its own sake. Its value lies only in its relationship to God. The church thus offers a corrective to both the neo-pagan worship of nature as divine and the exploitation of nature as purely immanent.

But the Church is not a place for abstract wisdom. It is a community of disciples of Jesus who have committed themselves to a renewed creation. Our task must then be to understand how we should live as creatures in the midst of an economy and culture that denies creation. For everything that the immanent economy destroys, the Church should restore; what the immanent economy ignores, the Church should take account of; when the immanent economy does not rest, the church should rest; when the immanent economy preaches autonomy and self-sufficiency, the church should preach dependence and interdependence.

Since our primary vocation as Christians is the praise of God, we should begin with considering how we might worship

alongside all creation. No guide is better here than St. Francis. St. Francis understood that whether it was a group of peasants or a group of flowers, all creation is essentially in the same business—that of praising and serving God. When we can begin to share his vision of creation as a choir, we will necessarily begin to practice the harmony that praise requires. When we see a tree, another animal, another person, a waterfall, we should remember our shared vocation and call upon these others to join us in the fulfillment of our call. When we see a clear cut, a strip-mine, a landfill, we should call out for the praise of the Creator, but also realize that the voice of creation has been damaged and distorted, that it is in bondage and in need of restoration.

The Church should take on this restoration as a part of its proclamation that Christ is Lord not only of the Church, but of the cosmos. We should take the places damaged by the immanent economy and restore them as an eschatological act, understanding that creation is not only what God made, but what he will restore. Gene Logsdon's *The Man Who Created Paradise* is a good example of such work. It is a fable based on the example of many real farmers who have bought strip-mined land and converted it into productive, small farms. The church could do what Logsdon's Wally Spero does; buy damaged land and with patience, intelligence, and care make it productive and flourishing. Such land is generally inexpensive and churches could easily buy it where it is available. The restoration of this land could be tied to other ministries, such as food pantries and education. Through such a project, the church could literally redeem what was destroyed through a sinful economy.

Another opportunity for churches to actively work toward an economy of creation is the ownership of church farms. Increasingly churches are the recipients of farm land from farmers whose children are uninterested in farming. The recipient church usually sells the land, relinquishing any say in its use, and uses the money from the sale for its ministries. But the farm itself could be a ministry of the church. The land could be retained and put under a conservation easement that would

permanently protect the land from abuse. Such easements are legal agreements made between the landowner and a land trust organization such as the Nature Conservancy or American Farmland Trust.

In 1998 the Dominican Sisters of Calwell, New Jersey put their 140 acres into such a trust under the Farm Land Preservation Program of the state of New Jersey. This land is the home of Genesis Farm, a community garden project that helps teach children about the care of creation. Land under conservation easement could also be used for garden space for the poor or leased to a farmer without the resources for her own land.

The church can also take responsibility for the use of land in other ways. Even without directly owning or farming land, all of us are daily involved in the use of creation through proxy. Every time we eat food, we are farming by proxy. Every time we flip on a light or type on a computer, we are coal mining through proxy. Even if we didn't strip-mine Appalachia personally, we did so through proxy since more often than not our electricity is generated from a coal-burning power plant. Such proxies are many, and at times necessary. But they should not be ignored. We should begin to take responsibility for what we do through proxy, rather than leaving it, as the immanent economy does, abstract and unaccounted for. There are several practical ways in which Christians can begin to take account of and responsibility for our proxies. One is to take control of our consumption. We are by necessity consumers, but this does not mean that we are without control over what and how we consume. Since food is daily and necessary, let us begin there.

As we have already noted, when we eat, we farm by proxy. We are then responsible to an extent for the way in which that food was grown. The only way to know for certain how your food was grown is to have a personal relationship with the farmer who grew it. Our first step must then be to buy from local farmers who practice good land use. Many cities have farmers' markets that provide nearly everything one could want to eat. The food is fresh, and buyers can build a relationship

with the farmer who grew it and know something of how he grew it.

There is a growing movement of small farms that offer Community/ Church Supported Agriculture programs (CSA). A CSA sells shares in the production of its farm at the beginning of the growing season. In return for the purchase of the share, the customer receives a weekly delivery of produce and in some cases meat, eggs, and milk from the farm. Some CSA-affiliated farms also have farm work days for share-holders in which they can be directly involved in growing their food. Many share holders have counted these work days as one of the most beneficial parts of their membership. Some churches have organized such programs through contracts with local farmers. The church's members are then able to eat fresh, local, and organic/natural food and to take responsibility for their consumption.

Robert Waldrop of the Oscar Romero Catholic Worker House in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma has created another model for a direct farmer-customer relationship through the Oklahoma Food Cooperative. Customers make monthly orders from a catalogue of Oklahoma farm products with full descriptions and contact information for each farm. The customers then pick up their orders at the church where Waldrop serves as music director. As customer and farmer participants increase, the network hopes to provide weekly orders and deliveries. The network also provides All-Oklahoma dinners at which the farmers and customers can eat together.

Another proxy for which we are responsibly is our waste disposal. Most of us bag our garbage and set it by the curb from whence it magically disappears. I have heard it recommended by some that we put our trash heaps in the middle of our cities. We could then see how much trash we really produce. And while I do not entirely disapprove of this idea I think that there are more direct and realizable steps that we can take. The first is to cycle back what is not waste.

Much of our garbage is food-waste. We throw it away and then send it along with Styrofoam cups and plastic plates, to our

landfills. But unlike plastic and Styrofoam, food waste can be cycled back into the ecosystem. It can become soil and then the nutrients for more food. Composting is a simple and easy way to turn trash into something productive. Mix table scraps with a little straw or sawdust in your backyard and you will be well on your way. If you live in an urban area, look around for a community garden that will take your table scraps for its compost pile.

A mindfulness of what and how much you throw away is also important. Everything that can be recycled should be recycled, but also disposable products should be reduced. Be watchful for trash that could be avoided. When you buy a few items that can easily be carried without a bag, refuse a bag at the cashier. When you have a few more items, carry a cloth bag with you. These steps are seemingly obvious, but rarely practiced.

Growing a little of your own food is also an important step in understanding your proxies and your dependence on the soil. Your garden could be as little as a pot of herbs in the kitchen window. Through having your own garden you will see the cycle of soil to seed to plant to food to soil again. You will also appreciate the sort of work and care that is required in the proper use of creation.

In helping reduce consumption churches could also offer places for people to share resources. Every single person need not drive to church alone. Car pools to church could be arranged. Also church members could share in work or assets. Some communities have created barter and trading programs. Others have created economies of “hours” in which hours of work are traded for products and services. One member might trade an afternoon of house painting for the use of another member’s table saw. Here an economy of “each according to his need” is more easily achieved than in the discrete economy of money.

CONCLUSION: HOME ECONOMICS

Every household is fundamentally an economy. Economy is literally, household management, coming from the Greek

oikonomia, *oikos* (household) + *nomos* (law). And this management must be taken seriously as the key to our living in integrity with creation. Too often environmentalism is wrapped up with petitioning the government, while the households of environmentalists are not markedly different from those around them. We must not leave to a higher order what a lower order can accomplish. In each of our homes we can begin to think through and make the changes necessary to live in integrity with creation. In our churches we can begin to organize the necessary structures to live in this integrity.

The City of God, said Augustine, is made up of many households. The management of these households with integrity is an essential task of the church. There are no easy answers as to how they should be managed. Some can give up their cars, but it is difficult for others to be helpful without them. Where to draw the line and how to manage our households is a task that all congregations should prayerfully consider together. The important thing is to ask ourselves difficult questions; to not do so would be gross irresponsibility in our care of the creation of which we are managers.

Our world is marked everywhere with the idolatrous scars of human avarice. We daily see the wastelands of a world that knows no truth and thus no beauty. “And yet,” as Hopkins wrote, “for all this nature is never spent.” In the sturdiest sidewalks of the greatest cities, the smallest of God’s grasses break through. We should welcome them with hope, a sign of the coming of God’s garden city—the New Jerusalem.

Ragan Sutterfield lives and farms in his native Arkansas. He serves as the president of the Arkansas Farm Community Alliance and teaches high school philosophy and theology at Little Rock Christian Academy.

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