

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Christianity versus Nature?

"Subduing the Earth: Genesis 1, Early Modern Science, and the Exploitation of Nature"
by Peter Harrison, in *The Journal of Religion* (Jan. 1999), Univ. of Chicago,
1025 E. 58th St., Chicago, Ill. 60637.

And God said to them "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." Genesis 1:28

For more than 30 years, "the orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature" (in historian Lynn White, Jr.'s phrase) has been fingered as the ideological source of contemporary environmental ills. Even some ecologically sensitive Christian theologians have joined in this indictment. But after examining ways in which Genesis was employed in the medieval and early modern periods, Harrison, a professor of philosophy at Bond University, Australia, paints a very different picture.

In the Middle Ages, White claimed in a 1967 *Science* article, the Judeo-Christian conception of creation had already resulted in attempts to use technology to master nature, as well as in incipient exploitative tendencies that matured in later, scientific eras. Not so, says Harrison, who contends that interpretations of Genesis during the first 1,500 years of the Christian era "are not primarily concerned with the exploitation of the natural world."

Early church fathers often interpreted the "dominion" injunction allegorically, to mean bringing the rebellious "beasts" within the human soul under the control of reason. "This allegorical approach to texts, which became universal practice during the Middle Ages," Harrison says, "also informed the structures of knowledge of the natural world. Knowledge of things was not pursued in order to bring nature under human control but, rather, to shed light on the meanings of nature and the sacred page."

To be sure, Harrison concedes, "the modifi-

cation of nature, oftentimes on a large scale, undoubtedly took place during the Middle Ages." Monastic communities, for example, engaged in farming and husbandry. The heavy plow was introduced, as were various other devices, such as water wheels and windmills. But all this can be explained by the human need for food and shelter, Harrison observes.

Genesis and the exploitation of nature were explicitly linked only in the early modern period, Harrison says. "In the 17th century . . . practitioners of the new sciences, preachers of the virtues of agriculture and husbandry, advocates of colonization, and even gardeners explicitly legitimat[ed] their engagement with nature by appeals to the text of Genesis. The rise of modern science, the mastery of the world that it enabled, and the catastrophic consequences for the natural environment that ensued, were intimately related to new readings of the seminal Genesis text, 'Have dominion.'"

However, "dominion" in the 17th century "is almost invariably associated with the Fall," as a consequence of which, "the natural world, too, it was thought, fell from its original perfection." In that context, dominion was "not an assertion of a human tyranny over a hapless earth," or an example of "arrogant indifference to the natural world," but rather "the means by which the earth

can be restored to its prelapsarian order and perfection."

In a sense, Harrison concludes, "early modern advocates of dominion and contemporary environmentalists share a common concern—to preserve or restore the natural condition of the earth, with the crucial difference between them residing in their respective views of what that 'natural condition' is believed to be."



When Adam and Eve fell, according to 17th-century readings of Genesis, so did the natural world.