



Creation or Nature? A Manner of Speaking

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I. DOES IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

What difference does it make to speak of “creation” rather than “nature”? As designations for “the environment,” the words are often used interchangeably, as though each had reference to the same essential reality. Yet the freight of meaning each word carries takes its own distinctive shape and may have, in fact, a quite different destination from the other. Consider the following review of a guide book released on Earth Day, 1990:

The World Peace University Field Guide to Connecting with Nature: Creating Moments that let Earth Teach... presents 110 newly researched educational techniques for energizing a modern person’s often neglected natural senses....It enables people to enjoyably know Nature as Nature knows itself. They bond to Earth because it feels right.¹

Contrast that with this claim about a church camp:

It’s the story of people who gather here to gain a new perspective, to be grasped...by an alternate vision of this world, and of life itself: a vision of it all not simply as Nature, but as Creation—as the gift of him in whose love all things find both their origin and their destiny.²

Both quotations deal with the way humans are related to the environment and also intimately a part of it. But the use of the terms “nature” and “creation” suggest differing assumptions about both environment and humans. They also point in differing directions for the ways those assumptions may be worked out.

¹As quoted in a review of the *Field Guide* in *The Outdoor Network Newsletter* (Spring 1990).

²From an audio-visual promotional presentation for a Lutheran outdoor ministry.

II. THE NARRATIVE GROUNDING OF CREATION-TALK

Both “nature” and “creation” have a variety of usages, of course. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, has fifteen entries for the former and seven for the latter. When the two terms are used of the environment, a casual appraisal might conclude that “creation” carries more specifically religious connotations than “nature.” To be sure, that sometimes is the case. People may seek to avoid a religiously-charged, even sectarian-sounding discussion of the environment

by avoiding “creation” and using what seems to be the more secular term, “nature.”

But there seems to be something almost endemic in our thinking—impulses once associated with Romanticism? our American Deist heritage?—that makes it easy for us to slip from lower-case to upper-case N in Nature. When we do so, as in the first quotation cited above, “nature” can carry as much religious freight as “creation.” Whether it’s perceived as Bambi’s beautiful world that takes care of its own apart from human intrusion, as the mystical Web of Existence, or Mother Nature, or Nature’s god, there’s much content in nature-talk that connects with the religious sentiments. Matters of origin and destiny, of ultimate value and meaning, are involved. So it’s not necessarily the case that “creation” is a religiously loaded term and “nature” a religiously neutral one—that “creation” is sacred and “nature” is secular. Both terms, in much common usage, reflect religious perceptions and commitments. And those religious perspectives are significantly different, not simply complementary.

There do exist some usages of “creation” that are less obviously religious.³ But for most persons, “creation,” when used of the environment, is less ambiguous about its theological implications than “nature.” People seem to recognize that creation must have a creator. In itself, this is not much different from the more covertly religious connotations of “nature,” which, however subtle they are, still call for some notions about nature’s god. But “creation” has standing behind it an implicit narrative—some story of origins—that “nature” lacks. Particularly when the word “creation” is allowed to retain its biblical roots,⁴ it is connected to a particular historical narrative, with all its attendant conceptual commitments, in a way that is just not possible for “nature.”⁵

Creation-talk insistently evokes the larger narrative: the one who created the world is the one who redeemed Israel from slavery, who spoke through the prophets, who raised our Lord Jesus Christ. That particular story unfolds the

³In the arts, for example, though even there the term’s metaphorical connections with the religious are seldom far away.

⁴I assume those roots in this essay, bracketing off, for the moment, issues of its relation to other faith communities’ narratives. Those issues are not unimportant, however, particularly when environmental matters must be approached in a pluralistic setting.

⁵Perhaps it’s to avoid those particular commitments that we tend to shy away from creation-talk when environmental matters are the subject of discussion. I wonder whether even use of the term “environment” itself is sometimes an effort to avoid the appearance of having a faith that genuinely shapes one’s perspectives. “Environment” may feel more neutral than either “creation” or “nature,” and more conducive to civility of discourse in contexts where participants do not share the same faith commitments. At the same time, particularly when issues of environmental ethics and policy are at stake, perhaps we should continue to slip creation-talk into the discussion from time to time. Doing so may press people to reflect on their underlying assumptions about the world, as it holds open the possibility that biblical faith just may be relevant to the matters at hand. At least creation-talk might keep us from too readily conceding the conceptual field to those who grant the role of God to chaos or chance, or who assume that faith commitments are wholly irrelevant.

character of the Creator and the purpose and destiny of the created. Creation-talk is part of a narrative whole that includes notions of covenant and community and faithfulness, of redemption and consummation. Those notions are important for reflection upon the environment, too. They matter theologically, anthropologically, and ethically.

Nature-talk, on the other hand, lacks such narrative grounding. Its religious force relies

more on vague notions of beauty and order, on what can be inferred about the laws of nature, and, in its more popular versions, on anthropomorphic reflection upon the inhabitants of “the natural world.” Nature’s god—or whatever it is that gives ultimacy to things—comes off, at best, as benign, disinterested, and inexorable; at worst, as wasteful, arbitrary, and whimsical, particularly with regard to individual entities in nature, and especially so with humans. Theodicy, for example, may have no satisfactory solution in either nature- or creation-talk; but the narrative connections of the latter offer significantly more possibilities for addressing that particular religious question.

The same is true when it comes to satisfying the human need for special relationship with the ultimate. When I behold the mysteries of nature, or when I “enjoyably know Nature as Nature knows itself,” I may be struck with wonder and awe, perhaps even a sense of reverence. But thanksgiving is irrelevant. In nature there is no one to thank; and it would surely be the height of arrogance to suppose any of it was meant particularly for us, for me. Yet, when I behold creation, I am called by implication specifically to such an audacious conclusion. Creation-talk, faithful to its biblical roots, calls me to thanksgiving, to worship. It points me to the one who calls me and all things into being and sustains us from day to day, to the sheer giftedness of it all. It calls me to enter into conversation with this one who stands at the beginning and end of all things—mine included—where my response in the conversation is received and matters. It’s difficult to imagine reflection on nature concluding with, “Therefore I surely ought to thank and praise, serve and obey him.” Reflection on creation fairly demands it.

At its heart, the difference between speaking of “creation” and speaking of “nature” in environmental matters may reflect the disparity between significantly different religious commitments. Continued use of creation-talk can aid in preserving and commending biblical perspectives for faith. It calls faith to trust above all in the goodness of the Creator before the goodness of the creation, so that faith is not set up for a fall when Bambi’s romantic world becomes “nature red in tooth and claw” in the experiencing. Creation-talk can also help avoid or correct an idolatrous turning towards “nature’s god”—an idolatry articulated egregiously, if unsophisticatedly, for example, in assertions like “I can worship God up here in the mountains better than I can in church.”

III. CREATION-TALK, HUMAN DESTINY, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The language of environment-as-creation also offers richer resources than does the language of environment-as-nature when those in the family of faith seek to articulate important dimensions of faith’s life in the world, particularly in relationship to the environment. I note here only two such areas where further creative and faithful articulation is much needed: the relationship of humans to the environment, and the relationship between the environment and human destiny.

1. Linking Humans to the Environment

The United States Wilderness Act of 1964 stands as a landmark in environmental legislation. In many ways, it also represents a legal high point in the vision of environment-as-nature. The act defines wilderness, in part, as that place where “Man is but a visitor,” and so exemplifies the perceived relationship of the environment to humanity in much

nature-talk: Humans are outsiders to nature, intruders into the natural scheme of things, at best, appreciative observers of what goes on there, at worst, disrupters of it.⁶ They almost inevitably, though often unwittingly, interfere with processes that should really be allowed to take their natural course. Insofar as humans stand over against nature, they too often unjustly deal with it as a frontier to be conquered or as a resource to be exploited; they seldom permit it simply to exist “naturally” for its own sake.

Much rings true in such a characterization. I live nearly half the year in the middle of a designated wilderness area. I am concerned that its pristine character be protected from the ignorant—and sometimes malicious—clods who often sully this magnificent terrain. The number of those who find issues of pure water and air resources more personally immediate is growing, not to mention those concerned about the ozone layer, the rain forests, and the oceans. Is it not possible that the perception of the human as “outsider to nature” is a more problematic view of the relationship than it’s worth, a perception to which creation-talk would seem to hold a more helpful alternative?

Contrary to much nature-talk, the biblical creation stories picture humans as very much a part of creation. Like everything else, humans are brought into existence by the divine word. Humanity and what is now called the environment share not only a common origin in God, but a common existence before the face of God, and a common valuation by God: everything is “very good.” The vision is one of solidarity before God; humans and the rest of creation are not “naturally” antagonists. Although sin enters the picture and introduces an antagonism, the vision of divine intention remains. And that vision may get us farther in environmental concerns than the picture of humans as “outsiders to nature.”

In fact, the vision of human-as-environmental-participant deriving from creation-talk may help to put our public environmental debates in a larger context. If all that exists is interrelated because it is the creation of God, then “all” must surely include the works of human hands. “Environment” is more than prairies and mountains and rivers and oceans. In some fashion it includes cities and societies and civilizations. While care must be taken not to paint issues with such broad strokes that their persuasive force is diluted, talk of “creation” may rightly conclude: both wilderness and city cry out for justice; their cries are part of the same song.

Of course, the relationship between humans and the rest of creation is not portrayed by creation-talk as one of simple equality. In the Genesis creation narratives, humans are given special responsibility for the rest of creation. Reflecting their special status as made in the image of God, they are given “dominion.” Interpreters have argued over the extent to which that word should be understood in terms of

⁶Not all nature-talk sets humans as outsiders or adversaries, of course. Talk of “spaceship earth” and other similar images of the environment, for example, seek to emphasize the way humans share with the natural world a common threat of destruction. Nevertheless, the opposition of humans to nature seems still the more predominant way of speaking and thinking.

power and control or in terms of stewardship and care-taking. The latter interpretation seems more persuasive and fitting to the narrative. Be that as it may, the point for the present is that the relationship of humanity to the rest of creation is not that of outsider but that of participant. The image of God does not make of humanity less of a creature.

What does seem clear is that the relationship of humanity to creation is implicitly characterized by human moral responsibility to care for the rest of creation. That responsibility is analogous to covenant responsibilities. It patterns human caring after divine caring—“in the image of God”—and is driven by the benediction of “very good” pronounced on the whole creation. Humans are fully—and only—creatures like everything else. Nevertheless, they have a special status located in their responsibility for other creatures and in their ability to recognize creation’s goodness and to enjoy and take delight in it as God does.

With this in mind, creation-talk also offers another useful perspective in environmental debate. There is room for skepticism, for example, “specie-ism”—as an analogue to racism, sexism, etc.—claims that all species, including the human, hold equal moral status. The same is true when “species diversity” is proposed as the chief environmental good—deduced or inferred, presumably, from observation of where nature seems to be headed. One may wish to hold up the possibility of raising questions about the relative value, however significant, of competing goods. If humans genuinely have both participatory and special status in creation, there must be more persuasive—and more faithful—ways to articulate environmental goods and goals than those particular catchphrases.

2. Environment and Human Destiny

What about the relationship of human destiny and that of the environment? Can connections be maintained between the environment and the more specifically theological concerns of soteriology and eschatology? While it is beyond the scope of this essay to work out those connections, I believe it important to do so and that biblically-grounded talk of “creation” offers significant resources.

Most speaking about the environment through the metaphor of “nature” seems to have little notion of an eschaton.⁷ Similarly, notions of salvation—at least in any ultimate sense—seem unnecessary in nature-talk. With the exception of the blundering or malicious human intruder, there is little from which nature really needs saving. Even that “salvation” can be reduced without remainder to what is necessary for humans to do to rectify matters. Divine activity and promise remain irrelevant.

Creation-talk, on the other hand, in its connection with the whole biblical narrative,⁸ leans toward soteriology and eschatology. Given both creation’s valuation by God as “very good” and the pervasive reality of sin, creation longs for—is being moved towards—New Creation. Certain New Testament themes are particu-

⁷To be sure, when nature is construed in a cosmological context, then entropy, or “the big collapse,” function to characterize the End of things.

⁸The importance of the connections between “creation” and the rest of the Bible must be emphasized, particularly at a time when avowedly religious voices are addressing environmental issues in a language of creation that is simply a variation of nature-language. Such language, to which some suggest Matthew Fox and Thomas Berry are inclined, for example, tends to float free of the whole biblical narrative. The biblical story insists creation, fall, redemption, and fulfillment be kept together.

larly instructive here. The language is more evocative than discursive. Creation “waits with eager longing,” clings to the promise that it “will be set free from its bondage to decay,” and “has been groaning in travail” waiting for the fulfillment (Rom 8). Creation is presumably included in the

“all things” that are held together in Christ, destined to be reconciled to him (Col 1). However such language is developed, it points in the same direction: human redemption and the redemption of all creation are of a piece. Whatever it is that humans need to do to care appropriately for the environment—all of which one might call First Article obedience—rests in the larger context of God’s promise to bring all things together in Christ in the fullness of time (Eph 1).

IV. DOES IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE? YES

What difference does it make to speak of “creation” rather than “nature”? This essay has sought to sort through some of the freight carried by the two words and to suggest for those of the household of faith the importance of the use of “creation” as a conceptual frame for our thinking and speaking about the environment. Of course, it would be inappropriate simply to substitute “creation” for “nature” in all linguistic situations. But tenacious exploration of creation-talk may well offer clearer self-understanding, confidence, and direction for the faith as it interacts with the world in matters of the environment.