

Consuming the Earth In Search of Our Worth¹

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June 15, 1998

We Christians are a varied lot. Beyond the handful of creedal commitments that we hold in common, we differ according to race and gender, language and culture, class and education, and so forth. But across these and other differences, one further trait we all share is this: *we are consumers of the earth.*

And that *isn't* a bad thing. It is part and parcel of what it means to be a living creature, to have a place in creation. Earth is a network of ecosystems representing a sort of biological government of consumers, by consumers, and for consumers.

Of the many factors which drive the assault on the earth today, the mere fact *that* we are consumers is not one of them. What *is* problematic is the *type* of consumers we are. This isn't the whole of the eco-crisis, but it is a central force behind it, and it merits our attention as Christians, especially because, as I will suggest, we have particular resources in our faith with which to respond.

I don't claim that all of the insights I offer here are uniquely Christian. In fact, I'm quite certain that persons from other religious traditions would hear echoes of familiar truth in what I say. But, as a Christian, I am responsible for "giving an accounting for the hope that is within" me (I Peter 3:15).

I have two central ideas to develop. Let me state them up front, and then I'll fill them out. First, I believe that what makes humans a qualitatively different type of consumer from the rest of our earth companions is that our consuming is tied intimately to a specifically human quest: the search for a sense of self-worth. Second, because I regard this as a fundamentally religious quest, I believe that it requires a fundamentally religious response. An ethic to guide our consuming the earth will need to be religious, or it will fail. Thus, the real challenge, for us as Christians, as we face

the eco-crisis, is to think through what it means to be a *Christian* consumer.

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Larry Rasmussen, a prominent American theologian, has written that human beings are characteristically storytellers. And that the most important stories we produce are cosmologies, cosmic stories which seek to organize the universe into a meaningful pattern. A pattern which, of course, is meaningful precisely because it tells us where we fit in the big scheme of things--and hence, how we ought to act. In fact, as Rasmussen shows, cosmologies bestow a way of life leading from rituals to rites and finally to a conviction of what is right: ritual stories tell us what is right. He concludes, "We are incorrigibly cosmic storytellers and without cosmologies we *literally would not know what to do.*"²

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a comparative religions scholar, has said that ultimately to be human is to be religious. He calls this the *essential* human quality, to live in the awareness of, and in response to, a transcendent dimension of reality, often named as God. For Smith, we are religious, not in addition to being human, but as the concrete way in which we *are* human. One is not human and then Christian; one is Christian as a particular way of being human.³

I suggest that alongside both of these important insights lies yet another fundamental feature of what it is to be human. *To be human is to desire worth.* And to be pained by its absence. Thus, most of the big stories our ancestors told, the cosmologies we inherited but have mostly discarded as too primitive for us, were efforts to establish not simply our place but our *worth* in the universe. And most religious traditions, including our own, can be seen (at least from one perspective) as attempts to discover or articulate our *worth* before God. Indeed, even those cynical persons who deny the truth of religion entirely deride it as the illusory way we think to secure our *worth* in the face of we they are convinced is Nothing (with a capital "N").

Alice Walker, in the passage which gave the title to her book, *The Color Purple*, intimates that we all simply wish to be noticed. She

¹This essay is a reworked version of an address given at the Notre Dame Earth Day Greenfest, April 18, 1998. I am especially indebted to the comments offered on the original draft by two colleagues at Notre Dame, James Ball and Elizabeth Groppe. Without bearing the blame for any remaining shortcomings, they each hold a share of credit for the strengths found herein.

²Larry Rasmussen, "Cosmology and Ethics," in *Worldviews and Ecology* (Bucknell Review 37:2) edited by John A. Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1993), pp. 173-180; quotation is from p. 178.

³Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), esp. pp. 129-138.

anthropomorphizes both nature and God in a way that may be more romantically evocative than absolutely true, but I think that her intuitions regarding humans are exactly on the mark. She writes:

But more than anything else, God love admiration. . . . [God] not vain, just wanting to share a good thing. . . . I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it. . . . People think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back. . . . It always making little surprises and springing them on us when we least expect it. . . . Everything want to be loved. Us sing and dance, make faces and give flower bouquets, trying to be loved. You ever notice that trees do everything to git attention we do, except walk?⁴

Well, maybe not quite everything.

So, we are creatures of worth--or we are creatures writhing beneath the pain of its absence. We might insightfully read the biblical account of the fall *into* sin as a fall *out of* a secure self-worth. From this perspective, domination of the earth is the attempt to justify our worth by proving it against the earth. Returning to the image of Alice Walker, I think in many ways the eco-crisis can be understood as the dire consequence of a desperate effort on the part of humans to be noticed in a universe which seems no longer to bestow on us sufficient self-worth. This has just as often been true of those in less developed societies, both past and present--they simply have had less grand technology at their disposal by which to give notice of their "worth" to the earth.⁵

Why *do* we burn the rainforests? Pollute the air? Poison the oceans? Rape the soil? Why *do* we pursue "development" almost entirely indifferent to the interests of our companion species? Why *do* we treat the earth as a convenience store on one hand and a garbage dump on the other?

Because we can. And in a world that seems all too indifferent to us, we are determined to be noticed. And when that indifference is felt as a

threat to our own worth, we are determined to be noticed . . . with a vengeance.

Sometimes our anguished fury is underwritten by a distorted sort of biological Darwinism that makes competition the hallmark of progress. Rosemary Radford Ruether, an eco-feminist theologian, has pointed out the fallacy of this thought in that it ignores both the way in which competition between and within species functions to the benefit of the whole ecosystem rather than just an individual species. She notes as well the equally important elements of cooperation and interdependence in ecosystems that are often more evident, even if less noticed by human observation.⁶

Still, this notion of competition as individual or species-specific success continues to reign in our economic, political, and environmental policies. Seen from this vantage point, survival of the fittest is reduced to a contest in which the last species standing is the winner. Then, thanks to human technology, life becomes a game we are uniquely suited to win--though ultimately at our own expense, of course. And we gain only a hollow and rather passing sense of self-worth along the way.

More often, however, because what we feel is a religious drive, a desire to place ourselves in a relation of worth with some unmovable ground, a carpet that cannot be pulled out from beneath our feet, we give it religious clothes.

The German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, believes that the roots of the eco-crisis run directly to a notion of God as absolute power. God, to be sure, has always been imaged as almighty, but only over the last several centuries, largely alongside the rise of industry and technology, has this aspect of God come to hold a privileged place, threatening to overwhelm all other aspects.⁷ Not entirely, of course. We continue to speak of God as love, perhaps also as wisdom. But the defining feature of God, that feature which we have sought to emulate with abandon when we see ourselves as *imago Dei*, as being in the image of God (Genesis 1:26), is power, sheer unfettered force.

Insofar as we have bound up our own self-worth with an understanding of the human person as bearing *this* image of God we have committed

⁴Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square Press [Simon & Schuster], 1983), pp. 178-179.

⁵Rasmussen, pp. 41-43.

⁶Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), esp. the chapter "Does Science Have a New Creation Story?" pp. 205-228.

⁷Jürgen Moltmann, "Reconciliation with Nature," *Pacifica* 5 (October 1992), pp. 301-313.

ourselves to the project of establishing our worth through a display of force against our fellow humans and against our world.

More than a few commentators have noticed the extent to which our technological advances were early on cloaked in metaphors all too reminiscent of the worst sorts of male-female relationships.⁸ Natural resources were seen as there to be exploited. Mountains and rivers were there to be conquered. Virgin forests were to be penetrated. Secrets were to be ripped from the bosom of nature which was imaged as a hostile woman to be subdued by whatever means necessary. In short, humans, that is, at the start of the industrial revolution, men, saw fit to rape the earth. Not so much out of lust as out of power. We took the earth by force. Because we could. Because to do so made us godlike. Because in conquest we thought we could find worth.

I would argue that this paradigm of dominance still today guides the manner in which we negotiate our sense of worth with the earth. Granted, we have softened the tone of our voice--at least in public. No one but the most arrogant CEO of a multinational corporation would be likely today to say that it is our right to rape the earth. But as we move from corporate headquarters to lesser levels of economic clout, there is a popular bumper sticker platitude which proclaims without embarrassment that we "shop till we drop." And we barely notice the number of species and ecosystems that have already dropped on account of our shopping.

When a large 24-hour discount/department/grocery store opened in my community a few years back they didn't worry that any consumers would find it either environmentally or spiritually offensive to announce their coming by emblazoning on billboards across town: "Anything you want. Anytime you want it. Cheap."

And so, driven by an existential anxiety over where we belong--and by a very limited notion of what it means to measure up to the mantle of *imago Dei*, we consume the earth in search of our worth. And our worth is measured largely by the amount of our consumption. Or, ironically, by the waste left over when we have consumed our fill. Paul Hawken, an ecologically-minded economist, notes that, when a tally is made of all the resources utilized to maintain our standard of living, the

⁸Anne M Clifford, "Feminist Perspectives on Science: Implications for an Ecological Theology of Creation," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8 (Fall 1992), pp. 65-90. Cf. Moltmann, p. 304.

average person in the United States generates twice their weight in waste--every day.⁹

It is not just that we think we need to keep up with the Joneses, but that we are trying as well to increase our "lead" over creation, as though by consuming more we can disprove that it was from dust we came and to dust that we shall return (Genesis 3:19). Our conspicuous consumption is driven by the same impulse that prefers to render Genesis 2:7 as "the Lord God formed a man (*adam*) from the dust of the ground (*adamah*)" rather than to highlight the Hebrew wordplay by translating it as "the Lord God formed a human (*adam*) from the humus (*adamah*)" or "the Lord God formed an earthling (*adam*) from the earth (*adamah*)."¹⁰ It is a wordplay with profound ecological and theological implications about where and how we fit in creation. And we overlook it--or ignore it--with the same fervor that we block out the growing heaps of garbage in our landfills.

The Barbie doll, since shortly before last Christmas, has been issued a credit card. Called "Cool Shoppin' Barbie," she comes with her own MasterCard which can slide through the accompanying authorization scanner--which always chirps "credit approved." Of course, it does. Given her slim, buxom figure, her fashionable clothes, her dream house and sleek car, is there any better American icon for the pursuit of worth through consumption than Barbie? Now available with unlimited credit. When challenged on this, that it was a bit irresponsible to push credit cards into the hands of young girls--and do so with the fantasy of unlimited credit--in a country where last year more than a million persons filed for bankruptcy, Mattel responded by saying, in effect, "it's all in fun. This is just pretend. Kids know that."¹¹ No, they don't.

Indeed, the eco-crisis is glaring evidence of the worst sort that we *adults* have yet to learn that unlimited credit is just pretend. In Deuteronomy (30:19) we hear God declare, "Behold, I call heaven and earth as witnesses before you today. I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live." Yet we have thought it

⁹Paul Hawken, *The Ecology of Commerce: A Declaration of Sustainability* (San Francisco: Harper Business, 1993), p. 12. Cf. Moltmann, p. 302.

¹⁰Anne Primavesi, *Apocalypse to Genesis: Ecology, Feminism and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 204-206.

¹¹Vanessa Hua, "Parents give credit card Barbie a low rating," *Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 1998, p. D1.

was possible--indeed for our self-worth *necessary*--to choose life *and* unlimited credit. It is not. And to pretend at unlimited credit is to choose death.

And still, we consume the earth in search of our worth. And we have done so for so long now, and have set in place economic systems and cultivated human appetites that will hardly be easy for us to change overnight.

Global warming, so much in the news this past year, has yet to find a firm place in the public imagination or in our patterns of consumption. Last year we read of nations wrestling with ways to slow the onslaught of greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere. But they could reach no consensus as an international community on how or even whether to act.

At the individual level, this past spring predictions were being made that 1998 would be a record summer for traveling. The economy seemed robust, consumer confidence was high, and, according to Energy Secretary Fredrico Penà, after adjusting for inflation, gas prices were expected to be "the lowest in recorded history."¹² So, of course, we could afford to consume more. Because the cost of gas continues to be measured only in dollars and cents, not in exhaust and ecosystem exhaustion.

Were the atmosphere our own child we would long ago have stopped looking for second opinions and agreed to even the most radical treatment plan. We would have reckoned more clearly the stakes of the matter. But the atmosphere, the oceans, the animals, the eco-systems, have all been reduced to mere stage props in a grand production by which we are convinced we will achieve fame and fortune. They are all the means to our worth. And so long as that is true, we will not find it within ourselves to exercise restraint let alone genuine affection toward creation.

Any earth ethic which calls for human restraint toward the rest of the earth community will fail, even if grounded in a claim to prudent self-interest. Because not even self-interest can guide us in the absence of self-worth.

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Let me turn now to my thoughts about a fundamentally religious response to this desire for self-worth.

St. Augustine is an ambiguous friend regarding creation. In places he displays a dualism and a sexism which have helped pave the way (and the choice of metaphor is particularly appropriate) for some of the worst abuses of the earth.

Elsewhere he hears in creation a voice animated by God and singing antiphons of praise back to its Maker. Yet I begin my answer in a different place altogether. For Augustine also writes, in a prayer to God, "You created us for yourself, and so our hearts are restless until we find our rest in you."¹³

If Augustine is right, then all of our feverish attempts to find rest, or worth, by asserting ourselves over creation, by consuming the earth, are bound to fail. Our consuming, it turns out, is misdirected.

Jesus said, "This is my body, given for you. Take and eat. This is my blood poured out for you, take and drink." *Jesus says, "Consume me."*

Christians, although we too seldom pause to meditate on it, endorse the profound idea that we consume our worthiness at the altar--rather than at the mall. Regardless of whether the Lord's Supper is understood theologically as a sacrament or a memorial, the basic point is clear--and crucial. In the Eucharist we don't first establish our worthiness and then approach the table. Rather, at the table itself--and at the invitation of God--we receive our worthiness as a gift.

And as a gift borne to us not insignificantly by a bit of wheat and a sip of wine. Granted, by the meagerest of morsels, by the faintest of sips. And there is a lesson in that, too, no doubt. But I want to call attention to the matter of the morsel and the wetness of the wine.

Knowing that we are finite creatures, bounded by space and time, comprised of flesh and blood, God does not confer the proclamation of our worth by mere words that can get scattered by the winds of our life. Knowing, too, that the promise of God's love is too overwhelming, too large for us to grasp, God offers the words of forgiveness, of worth, in a promise we can taste. And in this tasting of wheat and wine we encounter the extravagant love in which God holds us, and we discover a worth which we could never have wrested by force from nature. Because true worth is bestowed on another by an act of love freely offered.

Notice something significant here. This changes not only the focus of our consuming but also the image of our God. For at the altar, on the table, we encounter a God who defines deity not by the power of all consuming, self-serving force but by the practice of self-giving love. (From this vantage point, we can see that the doctrine of the Trinity, behind all its assorted endeavors to say something metaphysically profound about the nature of God, is finally the simple attempt to say

¹²AP wire service, "Gas prices could spark travel boom," *South Bend Tribune*, April 9, 1998.

¹³Augustine, *Confessions*, Book I:1.

that God's being is intrinsically intimate, an existence which is eternally in movement toward another, a life which is love.)

If we thus *receive* our worth as gift, we *exercise* it by echoing that gift to the rest of creation. *To live in the image of God is not to dominate the earth but to love it.*

Susan Bratton, trained both as an ecologist and a theologian, observes that throughout the Bible God displays toward the earth the same love characteristic of God's dealings with humanity. Animals, too, receive the blessing to be fruitful and multiply. God's providence and care extend to all of creation, even in the form of covenantal promise. And from the prophetic writings of Israel to the letters of Paul to Revelation of John, creation is included in the redemptive activity of God.¹⁴

Douglas John Hall, a Canadian theologian, and Sallie McFague, an American one, explore in depth what the shape of life *imago Dei*, lived in the image of God, might look like in terms of our encounter with the earth.¹⁵ As Christians we believe that our worth comes to us in wheat and wine because they carry the promise of God's love. But we believe they carry this promise because God's love was made even more tangibly present in the person of Jesus Christ. Following both Hall and McFague, I propose a model of the Christian consumer fashioned around the notion of *imago Dei*, particularly as manifest by Jesus.

I offer three basic motifs:

First, because we confess a God who in Jesus "so loved the world" (John 3:16), we will consume that world in a *Christian* manner, only as we also "so love" it. This suggests that somehow creation stands before us as a Thou, not an It; *we encounter the world on terms of intimacy.*

Just as Jesus was concerned to heal the sick and feed the hungry, so we will attend seriously to the needs of the earth--the land, water, and air--and of our fellow creatures. To do so will require us to adopt ways of thinking through our consumer choices that allow us to see beyond the

objectification of the world that our present patterns of consumption have required of us. For instance, Lloyd H. Steffen argues that when Adam names the animals in the Garden it is an exercise in establishing intimacy not authority.¹⁶ We may need to do nothing less than to "rename" the world around us, for we will learn to live *with* nature only as we realize that nature, for its part, and in its own way, is capable, too, of living *with* us.

In light of this, we will regard all of creation as bound for a common banquet with us. Jesus' table fellowship was both festive and inclusive, often quite beyond the comfortable expectations of his contemporaries. In a similar fashion, we will want to find ways to feast *with* rather than *off* the earth, to include the entire community of creation in our fellowship, even if such consuming puts us out of step with the billboard mentality of our culture.¹⁷

Second, as Christians we will inevitably find that loving the earth presumes *a willingness to practice some measure of sacrifice for the earth.* Perhaps not in ways so dramatic as are recounted in the Gospel narratives, but in ways that are real nonetheless. Such a willingness to sacrifice, to place limits on one's own self on behalf of the other is essential in any authentic love relationship. Jesus is, of course, the supreme example of this, but not simply on account of his death. Rather, it is the motive behind his death, his refusal to break solidarity with sinners that defines his death sacrificially, it is his considered commitment to the weak, to the "least of these" (Matthew 25:40), and his willing decision to bear the cost of that commitment.

Love is always guided, and to no small extent, by the needs of the other. This means that Christian consumers will be challenged to relate to creation via purchase patterns independent of (or at least not driven solely by) a concern with the greatest convenience and the lowest cost. It suggests that patience, nurturance, and even prodigal care-giving without any hope of repayment will be among our *normative* and not merely our eccentric dispositions as we plan our lives, from personal shopping trips to church

¹⁴Susan Bratton, "Loving Nature: Eros or Agape?" *Environmental Ethics* 14:1 (Spring 1992), pp. 3-25, esp. pp. 8-9.

¹⁵Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and New York: Friendship Press, 1986), esp. pp. 193-204; and Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) esp. pp. 162-170. My 4-point portrait is a free adaptation of their respective work, though I believe it offers a fair representation of their own models.

¹⁶Lloyd H. Steffen, "In Defense of Dominion," *Environmental Ethics* 14 (1992), pp. 63-80.

¹⁷On the idea of creation's destined banquet, see also the chapter "The Sabbath: The Feast of Creation" in Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1985), pp. 276-296.

building projects, from family vacations to community development proposals.¹⁸

Third, *being Christian consumers will mean taking a risk*. Too often, because of the enormity and complexity of ecological concerns, the apparent paucity of our numbers (in our society we are often led to see ourselves as a community of one), and the seeming insignificance of any single consumer choice-----we do nothing. If we cannot guarantee with relative certainty that our responsible actions will make a difference, we relieve ourselves of the responsibility to act--or to act differently from anyone else. And yet, as Christian consumers we need to make commitments that take the risk--and embody the hope--that others alongside us in the present or coming after us in the future will build upon the choices we make and carry them even further.

In other words, as Christians we are to intentionally shape our consuming by the risky and discomfiting claim that we will secure "the good life" by losing it--or at least by sharing it with the "least of those" around us, from our fellow humans to the rest of the community of creation.

As we practice patterns of consumption guided by these motifs we will discover what it means to be *Christian* consumers, to be finite creatures in a finite creation, consuming the earth with love.

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So let me draw all of my thoughts together now.

I have argued that the eco-crisis is driven, in large part--and certainly to an extent as yet unrecognized--by a crisis of self-worth. That we are, in fact, consuming the earth in search of our worth. And that this is tied as well to a particular image of God as pure power, as all-consuming.

I have claimed that an earth ethics must address this question of self-worth before anything else. Because until our self-worth is secure, no amount of reasoned argument will persuade us to live more simply so that the earth and the rest of its inhabitants might simply live.

I have suggested that a *Christian* earth ethic begins in the worth which is offered to us at the altar--and that realizing this alters our image of God from an all-powerful, consuming God to a God willing to be consumed.

And I have offered a simple sketch of what it means to consume the earth *secure* in our worth, shaped by the motifs of intimacy, sacrifice, and risk.

This leaves the details of what it means to be a Christian consumer in any given situation, before any particular choice, yet to be discussed and determined. I realize that. And I think it's essential that we not presume there is a fixed set of rigid rules that will apply in every time and place. Indeed, to propose a consuming guided by love is to propose a doing that is framed by listening. It is an ethic that takes seriously the needs of both humans and non-human creation in every concrete setting. It is an ethic that unfolds only in the practice of love itself.

But it seems an important step to me--and one often overlooked in much reflection on this theme--that we at least be clear that Christians consume the earth secure in--and inspired by--the same love with which God regarded it from the cross and still today encounters it from the altar.

In closing, let me acknowledge that I don't expect this proposal to be popular. I simply believe that it is truthful.

If we can learn to accept our worth as the freely given gift of God we will find, in the midst of that experience, a wealth of affection for the earth. And we will just as surely find ourselves called to make sacrifices and take risks in order to care for and restore the health of creation. We *will* live with less--there is no way around that. Though perhaps we will find ourselves living more deeply for having acknowledged at last the good company of those creatures whose world we share.

I do not say we must starve ourselves for the earth, but we *will* feel, in one way or another, a quite real hunger and a quite real thirst as we begin to practice restraint. And we will need to learn *not* to satisfy it with the excess to which we have grown accustomed.

When we are willing, confident of the worth promised to us by God, to value creation at some real cost to ourselves . . . when we are able to consume the earth guided by a love which is content simply to say at times, as Jesus did on the cross, "I thirst" (John 19:28) . . . then, and only then, will we discover the truth that the same God who thirsts on the cross is the one who says, "Behold, I make all things new. I make justice to roll down like mighty waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Revelation 21:5; Amos 5:24).

¹⁸On this theme of sacrifice see also the important remarks of Bratton, pp. 22-24.