

1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

3 Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

6 And God said, 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.' ⁷So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. ⁸God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

9 And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. ¹⁰God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. ¹¹Then God said, 'Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.' And it was so. ¹²The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. ~~And God saw that it was good.~~ ¹³And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

14 And God said, 'Let there be lights in the sky to give light upon the earth, and to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and for years. ¹⁵And God made the greater lights, the sun, the moon, and the stars, and set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, ¹⁶to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁷And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

And God Saw That it Was Good: An Environmentalist Approach to Dominion

20 And God said, 'Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.' ²¹So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. ²²God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.' ²³And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

24 And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.' And it was so. ²⁵God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

26 Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' ²⁷So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. ²⁸God blessed them, 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.'

29 God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. ³⁰And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.' And it was so. ³¹God saw everything that he had made, and indeed it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day

Emilie Stowell
Senior Thesis
Spring 2004

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Genesis 1

1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

³ Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

⁶ And God said, ‘Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.’ ⁷So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. ⁸God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

⁹ And God said, ‘Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.’ And it was so. ¹⁰God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. ¹¹Then God said, ‘Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.’ And it was so. ¹²The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. ¹³And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

¹⁴ And God said, ‘Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, ¹⁵and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.’ And it was so. ¹⁶God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. ¹⁷God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, ¹⁸to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

²⁰ And God said, ‘Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.’ ²¹So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. ²²God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.’ ²³And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

²⁴ And God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.’ And it was so. ²⁵God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

26 Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’²⁷ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.²⁸ God blessed them, 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.’

29 God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.’³⁰ And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so.

31 God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

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Introduction

On a warm September day in 1982 a group of black church women in Warren County, North Carolina decided enough was enough. They went out to the highway where the Ward Transfer Company was dumping oil laced with toxic levels of PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls). To prevent any further dumping, the women laid down on the road to physically block the trucks' progress. It was impossible for them to stand by and watch a corporation threaten their health and their environment and get away with it simply because they lived in a poor, black community. Within two weeks, the rural county saw four hundred people arrested for their protest. This protest was a landmark case and symbolizes the beginning of the African American Church's involvement in environmental racism and illustrates the capacity of religious groups working on environmental and public health issues.¹

The protest in Warren County signifies an unprecedented response to a common occurrence and is only one example of the thousands of environmental degradations continually occurring. Reading the newspaper, spending time in intercity neighborhoods or walking through clear-cut forests shows that this is a time of environmental crisis. Our health and security are at risk as we pollute and deplete the natural resources we depend upon. Beyond the primary impact on human beings, the disappearing resources are consuming the natural world, killing animals and destroying acres of natural landscapes everyday. Human beings' effect on the environment have directly caused this crisis. People know about the devastating effects of our actions yet the problem grows. We have come to a point where innovative technology will not be enough to solve the problem. We must understand it is a crisis of our own making, and the solution

¹James Cone, "Whose Earth is it, Anyway?," in *Earth Habitat: Eco-Injustice and the Church's Response*, ed. Dieter Hessel and Larry Rasmusen, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 27.

depends upon a change in our behavior and attitude toward the environment. For long-term change, people must delve into their moral and ethical resources and find a way for meaningful environmental ethics to effect their worldview and daily actions.

Many religions of the world recognize their powerful potential for involvement in environmental issues and ethics. The editors of Harvard's Forum on World Religions and Ecology claim religions need to be reexamined in light of the environmental crisis "because religions help to shape our attitudes toward nature in both conscious and unconscious ways. Religions provide basic interpretive stories of who we are, what nature is, where we have come from and where we are going."² These traditions inform our cosmologies which dictate how we interact with the world. The creation stories in Genesis offer a rich source for Biblical worldviews. These stories deal with questions of identity, explaining who we are, where we come from, and our role in creation. The first story, in Genesis 1, deals with our role in the world directly, by granting human beings dominion over the all living creatures. Dominion offers a valuable resource for discussing environmentalism in a Biblical context because it situates human beings in the world. The environmentalist reading of Genesis 1 presented here can enrich and enliven environmental theology by developing specific guidelines for how one should exercise dominion according to the text. This understanding uses a central religious text to identify our relationship with the environment and empowers Christian groups to engage environmental problems from a religious grounding. As one of the most powerful religions in the world, Christianity can become a forceful factor in environmentalism. The environmental

²Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim, "Series Forward" *Christianity and Ecology*, ed Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), xvi.

crisis is one of the most pressing issues of this era and can provide relevant social action for Christians to protect their world.

Dominion

In the first chapter of Genesis God creates humankind and tells them to “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.”³ Human beings are granted a ruling position over the animals and the earth through the mandate to exercise dominion and subdue the earth. This passage directly deals with the role of human beings in creation, therefore has become a popular resource for understanding environmentalism in a religious context. Within the study of environment and religion, the two main questions surrounding dominion focus on the interpretation of dominion: does it support a domination model or a stewardship model, and how should one practice dominion? Both of these questions are open to interpretation because the word dominion simply means ruling over something.

Dominion is the translation of the Hebrew word *rhada* which means lordship or authority to rule.⁴ When used in various texts in the Bible, the word *rhada* refers to the fact of someone ruling over people or a place but implies nothing about how to perform in that role. The term “dominion” appears several times in the Bible, and often refers to God’s dominion over Israel and the world. Note, for example Psalm 22:28: “for dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations.” God’s dominion creates a ruling position. 1 Kings describes Solomon as a ruler, who “had dominion over all the region west of the Euphrates from Tiphseh to Gaza, over

³Gen. 1:28 (New Revised Standard Version).

⁴Oxford English-Hebrew Dictionary, 1996.

all the kings west of the Euphrates; and had peace on all sides.”⁵ These texts all discuss dominion as a ruling position, but each context, not the word itself, explains how one should rule. That Solomon must rule, and have dominion in doing so, is certainly clear. But what would it mean to rule well or with compassion or with some understanding of the earth as God’s creation? These are the questions Genesis 1 seeks to answer, for there dominion speaks to how human beings should relate to the world.

An article by Lynn White Jr. in 1967, titled, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis” initiated a heated debate about the role of dominion in current environmental problems. He brings up two interesting claims. First, that Christianity (as he perceives it) played a dominant role in creating the current environmental state. Second, in describing the environmental crisis he claims that “since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not.”⁶ White recognizes a tension between the environmental crisis and a possible interpretation of dominion allowing domination. He calls for environmentalists to find a different model. White examines Christianity because he claims that “especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen.”⁷ He thinks people believe “God planned all of this [creation] explicitly for man’s benefit, and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes. And, although man’s body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God’s image.”⁸ According to White, human beings have appealed to the concept of dominion as an excuse to dominate, and this in turn forms the basis of

⁵1 Kings 4:24.

⁶ Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science*. 10 March 1967, 1207.

⁷Ibid, 1205.

⁸ Ibid, 1205.

modern ecological problems. Though I have some problems with the fine details of White's article, he sparked debate about how to exercise dominion, and drew attention to the study of Christianity and ecology. In response to White, countless articles have appeared connecting dominion from Genesis 1 with environmental practices. Many of these articles work to develop stewardship models of dominion which emphasize taking care of the earth as an exercise of dominion. All of these articles have placed dominion as a central theme in the field of environmental theology.

A diversity of voices replied to White's claims, but despite the breadth of response, the applied meaning of dominion remains a central issue for environmental ethics and religious practice. White's article provoked many theologians to argue that the Bible can yield a notion dominion as stewardship as an alternative model to dominion as domination. Old Testament Scholar James Barr, for example, associates dominion from Genesis 1 with Solomon's governance: "the dominion that humans have over the earth is to be analogous to the governance of a kindly ruler who seeks to protect and preserve a cherished realm."⁹ Though an appeal to Solomon's dominion yields an environmental reading of human dominion it doesn't account for the context of Genesis 1. Christian theologians must do more than merely claim dominion and the exercise of it. They must explain and clarify how to exercise dominion justly and have those guidelines come from within the tradition.

Theologian Jay McDaniel takes what he calls a "Liberal Protestant" approach, and appeals to the Bible as support for environmentalist responses to the ecological crisis.¹⁰ He does

⁹ Jay McDaniel, "The Garden of Eden, The Fall, and Life in Christ: A Christian Approach to Ecology," in *Worldviews and Ecology*.ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John A Grim, (Lewisberg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1993), 74.

¹⁰Ibid, 73.

not view dominion as a religious mandate, but as an irreversible “historical fact.”¹¹ Since dominion cannot be ignored, McDaniel calls for human beings to practice “right dominion” which will lead people to protect the environment. He utilizes a stewardship model to support his generalized terms about how dominion should be practiced:

It [dominion-as-stewardship], offers an image of the right way to exercise power in nature, as opposed to the wrong way upon which so many industrial civilizations are now embarked. At least this is the case if stewardship itself is understood to involve wise management undergirded by respect for life and environment. This, I believe, is what the biblical idea of stewardship recommends at its best. Understood as kindly use in a spirit of respect, the image of stewardly dominion invites us to maximize the quality, not the quantity of human life, with minimum abuse of domesticated animals and minimum impact on wildlife and habitats. It invites us to develop societies that are ecologically sustainable even as they are socially just.¹²

This model for understanding dominion in a general way offers a helpful paradigm for interacting with the environment. In light of environmental problems we must utilize “wise management” of resources and maintain “respect for life and environment.” Yet even as McDaniel calls for environmental practices, he does so in a textual vacuum. He appeals to biblical imagery, but fails to engage the text itself. He offers sweeping and grand claims, but does not ground them in the very text that gives rise to those claims. In short, he uses the biblical text to provide a model for environmental ethics, but then quickly disengages the text when engaging in environmental practice. It is as if McDaniel is afraid of the text, as if the text could not possibly support his reading.

This paper presents an environmentalist reading of dominion in Genesis 1 as a form of empowerment for religious groups working on environmental issues. I want to argue that in response to McDaniel, the text of Genesis 1 can become a rich resource for a theologically sensitive approach to environmental ethics. A close textual analysis shows how “dominion” is

¹¹Ibid, 74.

¹²Ibid, 75.

an essential unifying force in creation. This reading of Genesis presents a world filled with interconnected relationships that hold creation together. Examining the interconnected relationships in Genesis 1 reveals a strong environmental ethic and understanding of dominion specific to Genesis 1. This form of dominion derives from a textual reading and enriches previous notions of the role of human beings. It also pulls McDaniel's "historical fact" of dominion back into the textual and religious features of Genesis 1. Through this reading, McDaniel's previously problematic text becomes a valuable resource for environmental theology. Theologians need not abandon religious sources, nor look elsewhere for environmental themes. These themes already exist within the Bible and should be cultivated to enrich a Christian view of environmental ethics.

A textually sensitive reading of dominion can be a valuable resource for religious people working on environmental issues. It deepens their connection to the issue and offers them a religious lens to view environmental issues. This reading must be able to accommodate the diversity within Christian populations which Black Liberation Theologian James Cone sees lacking in environmental theology. In the article, "Whose Earth is it, Anyway?" James Cone agrees with Lynn White's claim that understanding dominion as domination has led to environmental destruction. He goes on to state "the logic that led to slavery and segregation in the Americas, colonization and apartheid in Africa, and the rule of white supremacy throughout the world is the same one that leads to the exploitation of animals and the ravaging of nature."¹³ Both people and the environment suffer at the hands of the same mentality of one group dominating another. By addressing dominion, an environmentalist understanding of Genesis 1 could benefit racial issues as well as the environment.

¹³Cone, 23.

The environmentalist reading relates specifically to environmental racism issues because environmental degradation disproportionately affects poor and minority groups. These groups bear the brunt of pollution, resource scarcity and other environmental issues, yet Cone sees them excluded from environmental theology. He wants theologians to “deepen our conversation by linking the earth’s crisis in the human family. If it is important to save the habitats of birds and other species, then it is at least equally important to save black lives in the ghettos and prisons of America.”¹⁴ A just practice of dominion must incorporate attention to both human beings and the environment at the same time because they both inhabit God’s creation.

Chester, Pennsylvania is a place in need of a just practice of dominion. It is an overwhelmingly poor and African-American community, constitutes a clear example of environmental racism. University of Michigan professor Bunyan Bryant defines environmental racism as “an extension of racism... [by] the unequal protection against toxic and hazardous waste exposure and the systematic exclusion of people of color from environmental decisions affecting their communities.”¹⁵ The three waste processors in this poor area have extensively damaged the health of the residents. Chester has the highest percentage of low-weight births in the state of Pennsylvania. It is almost double the percentage in the rest of the county.¹⁶ This is just one of the many atrocities in Chester due to the waste processors. An environmentalist approach to dominion can empower local religious groups to become involved in racist and environmental issues, and thus deal with these issues with a religious vocabulary.

¹⁴Ibid, 32.

¹⁵ Bunyan Bryant, “Introduction,” in *Environmental Justice :Issues, Policies, and Solutions*, ed Bunyan Bryant, (Washington, D.C. :Island Press, 1995), 5.

¹⁶ Chester Environmental Justice Factsheet:Public Health, April 1996, <http://www.ejnet.org/chester/factsheet.html>, April 10, 2004.

Reading of Genesis 1

Genesis 1 describes creation as a complex world of interrelationships, with each part dependant upon the rest. Human beings serve an essential function by maintaining and cultivating all the relationships, and so prevent creation from returning to the original state of chaos. Human beings are created in the image of God, so in God's image human beings utilize a divine-like capacity for speech, agency and recognition. The practice of dominion described in this reading involves recognizing how the world interrelates and acting with a vision of how to protect those relationships. An environmentalist reading of Genesis 1 develops specific guidelines for how one should exercise dominion. It empowers Christian groups to attack environmental problems from a religious grounding with guidelines provided by a central text in their tradition.

In this story, God creates the world, and human beings maintain relationships between the land, plants and animals. Analyzing the whole chapter situates dominion within a literary context, offering a robust picture of how dominion functions in this text. In the span of seven days God transforms the earth from a chaotic void to a beautifully complex system of relationships between all the different elements. God interweaves each part of creation together so everything interconnects with the rest of the world. The acts of creation reveal a God who forms order out of chaos and prevents the return to chaos by establishing relationships within creation and protectors of those relationships. Human beings play an essential role by maintaining these relationships, and therefore guard creation, protecting it from a tendency toward disorder. At the end of creation, God's field of vision expands outward and in verse 1:31 God "saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." The sum is greater than

the whole, and dominion mandates that human beings protect the interconnected relationships in the world.

This paper first examines the story of creation as a whole, and then uncovers the individual parts that elucidate the idea of dominion. Genesis 1 reveals a world of relationships, and dominion exists within those relationships. To understand dominion means to understand how creation fits together. Recognizing the role of human beings in creation through Genesis 1 enlivens our environmental duties in the world.



The text opens with total darkness over a wet chaotic expanse. Devoid of any form or structure. A wind from God sweeps over the face of the waters, alerting the audience to a divine presence. Creation commences with God calling out “let there be light,” in verse 1:3 and a diffuse lightness appears at God’s command in the void. From the chaotic mass, God forms an interconnected world with time; the forms of land, plants and creatures, and human beings.

God commands and works the formless void into the basic shape of the world. When God pulls the initial light out of the dark chaos, temporal order enters the world in a countable and organized form of days and nights. Then God creates physical order by fashioning the chaos into the sky, land and waters. These three spaces form the structure of the world and all future growth will exist within these constructions. From them, God extracts the raw material for creating life. From the raw material God creates plants, fish, birds, animals, and insects. The complex symbiotic nature of life on earth makes the world resilient against the push toward chaos, because their relationships weave a coherent world. As a collection of autonomous parts, God’s creation remains chaotic. Completion depends on human beings sewing all the relationships together, thereby uniting the world. When God “sees” the whole world united it is

“very good.” As God created it, human beings act as stewards for creation by maintaining the relationships in the world which prevents a return to chaos. Since human beings tie creation together, the Genesis God can now step aside from the physical aspect of creation, and call it “very good” in verse 1:13.

I use the term sections to describe the clusters God recognizes as “good.” A section refers to everything which occurs between one moment of recognition and the next. This pattern loosely follows the progression days, but not exactly. The second section of creation incorporates the separation of the light from the darkness to form night and day in verse 1:4, on the first day. It also incorporates the separation of waters on the second day, and the emergence of dry land on the third day. As God recognizes each section as “good” the section has a unique definition of “good” depending on the composition of that section and its unique contribution to the world.

In order to practice dominion according to Genesis 1 we must understand what kind of world the text describes. Understanding the complexity and nature of the world we have dominion over informs what approach to dominion is appropriate for this world. In verses 1:29-30 God explains to the first human beings how the world interconnects by revealing the relationships between the different aspects of creation. The different sections of creation recognized as “good” and “very good” along with verses 1:29-30 describe the nature of the world to human beings. In the final vision of creation God “sees” all the “good” sections and “sees” human beings as the ones who maintain the relationships in creation. God recognizes this comprehensive view of the world as “very good.” Only by utilizing the broad picture of Genesis 1 can one explain the practice of dominion.

The nature of each creative grouping supplies a slightly different definition of “good” in each situation. Only a contextually sensitive reading of Genesis 1 can elucidate the specific meaning of the “good” awarded to each group. Examining the separate sections deepens and explains the meaning of “very good.” God’s view of the world as “very good” sees the six creative moments that were merely “good” and finds them embedded within a unified, coherent and ordered world.

The phrase “And God saw it was good” repeats six times in Genesis 1 at the end of the creative actions. God’s sight in this phrase involves more than mere looking, but implies taking stock of the view. From this sight God determines the contents of the view are “good.” Each section offers a unique and essential element to creation. The composition of a section defines why God considers that it “good.” I want to locate six different meanings for the term “good”: the goodness of light, structure, fertility, order, habitat, and multiplicity of life forms. This reading, God’s creative acts suggest it is “good” that the light is separate from the darkness, and “good” that the world is divided into distinct sections. It is “good” that plants yield fertile fruits, and the sun and moon maintain separation between the day and night. How the fish and the birds belong to their habitats is “good” as is the diversity of life on land. All these “goods” relate to each other.

In the first act of creation, God commands light into existence, “and there was light” intermingled with the darkness. In the second section God shapes the chaos by separating light from darkness, water from the sky, and land from water. God recognizes the separation of day, night, land, water, and sky as “good” because they create the physical and temporal structure of the world. In the third section God creates plants “yielding seed” which bring fertility to the

previously barren landscape. The sun and moon maintain the separation between the day and the night in the fourth section. As celestial bodies they protect the order God created on the first day by maintaining the light as separate from the darkness. In the fifth section birds fill the sky and fish fill the waters with life in a way that uniquely suits their habitats. Finally, the sixth section fills the land with life in many different forms such as wild animals, domestic cattle and insects. These six groups explain what is “good” and pleasing to God about the world. When human beings exercise dominion over the land and diverse life forms they are protecting what is “good” about creation.

In verses 1:26-27 God creates human beings, to “have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” In order to conceptualize the type of dominion described in this passage one must understand the type of world human beings live in. Verses 1:29-30 illustrate that we inhabit an interrelated and interconnected world with each part dependant on everything else. Human beings exercise dominion over the world by maintaining the relationships described to them in verses 1:29-30. Here, God describes to the first human beings how the different parts of creation connect to each other.

“See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the earth, and every tree upon the face of all the earth, and every seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given to every green plant for food.”

Each type of creature is allotted a different type of food, so there will be food from diverse sources for each type of animal and the human beings. This passage explicitly describes that the world is not composed of autonomous parts, but a system of parts dependant on each other for survival.

The unique ways each aspect of creation contributes to the function of the system determines the nature of their relationships. As noted earlier, plants were deemed “good” because they brought fertility to the world, and here God emphasizes their seed and fruit. They relate to the rest of the world because their fertility brings life and sustenance to all creatures as food. The passage also reiterates the importance of diverse life forms because “everything that has a breath of life” receives the basic necessities for life.

The prototypical humans used their sight to recognize the interconnections God points out in the world. For them, recognition involves understanding and identifying the different parts as they fit together. Human beings’ capacity for sight contributes to their practice of dominion. When the first human beings demonstrate their ability to recognize creation in verses 1:29-30, God then sees everything as “very good” in verse 1:31.

At the end of the sixth day, God looks out at creation in every direction, embracing all that exists. From this comprehensive view God recognizes *everything* as “very good.” The individual sections possessed qualities which made them “good,” but when seen as a coherent whole with human dominion the world becomes even better, attaining the status of “very good.” In the expansive view of creation, God “sees” everything including the six “good” groups, human beings, and most importantly, how all of these parts interrelate with each other. Each notation of good; illumination (the first light), separation (night, day, land, water, sky), fertility (seeds), life belonging to a space (birds and fish), maintaining separation (sun and moon), and diversity of life (land animals) is a part of “very good.” After six days of creating individual parts, God now “sees” the world as one integrated system, a system dependant on human beings to maintain the relationships.

The relationships God designed in creation strengthen the organizational structure in the world by supporting the individual functions of each element. The interrelationships emphasize the unique qualities of each part of creation because each part relies on other elements of creation for the functions it cannot perform. The distinct aspects become even more important when the parts depend on each other. Connecting all the different parts of creation allow the whole world to function as one system instead of individual parts.

God's unique relationship with the earth grounds the relationships in the world. The chaos becomes the earth which God uses to create an organized world. In the beginning before the first act of creation, only God and the earth existed. God lit the void and then separated the earth into dry land, oceans, and air. These three spaces were then inhabited by plants and animals, which God created from the earth. The earth "put forth vegetation," the waters brought "forth swarms of living creatures," and the earth brought "forth living creatures of every kind." The earth provided the raw materials and God formed the creative act of construction and giving life. God's creation of human beings in the second creation story in Genesis is no different. From the dust at the riverside in verse 2:7 God formed Adam, the first human. In Hebrew, Adamah means ground, the physical soil of the land. Adam serves as a constant reminder that humans were first formed from the earth. God's breath into Adam's nostrils gave him the breath of life, making him human. Creation unites earth and God; earth as the substance and God as the creator and animator. This relationship reminds human beings that the world is God's creation. To exercise dominion is to protect God's earth.

Within the broad context of creation as an interdependent system, specific details emerge to describe how human beings should practice dominion according to Genesis 1. Human beings

have dominion over a world that is rich with interrelationship that also has the possibility of returning to a chaotic state. The function of the sun and moon as rulers of order in the sky contributes to understanding how human beings should rule over the earth. The creation of human beings in God’s image explains what abilities they have for exercising dominion. Each of these aspects contribute to understanding dominion as protection of order.



The text only refers to human beings in relation to their dominion. For example, in 1:26 God declares, “and let them [human beings] have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” Again in verse 1:28 God blesses them, “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea...”

Animals fit into their physical landscapes as perfectly as a tree fits into its bark. Animals meet the requirements of their environment exactly; the fish are never just fish, instead they are the fish of the sea. The birds are never just birds, instead they are birds of the air. Their environment essentially forms their identity and an inescapable aspect of who they are. Human beings belong to dominion in the same way the animals belong to their habitats. As fish must stay in the sea, and birds must fly in the air, human beings must exercise dominion over what God gave them.

At the end of the sixth day, when looking at everything, God sees all of creation as a highly organized world. This organization is not safe, though, from a return to chaos. All of the organized parts were formed out of chaos and only the mechanisms God implements can protect creation. As the sun and moon rule over the sky to protect the order of day and night so human beings rule over the animals and the earth to protect and maintain the relationships of creation.

The sun and the moon jointly rule day and night while in a parallel manner human beings possess dominion over the animals. As the two parts of creation that hold this ruling position, the sun and moon provide a “good” model for human dominion. The sun and the moon exist in the sky “to give light upon the earth, to rule over the night and the day, and to separate the light from the darkness”(1:17-18). They rule through separating the light from the darkness but also relate those distinct spaces to each other.

Up until the creation of the sun and moon, time passed only as days and nights, but with the sun and moon as rulers of the sky time could be delineated. Not only do the sun and moon separate night and day, but they are also “signs for seasons and for days and years”(1:14) With the sun and the moon time may develop into larger organizational units than just days and nights.

The celestial bodies maintain, preserve and expand the order God created, but preservation of the order of day and night also means cultivation. Light came into its own, only in a separate space from darkness. The sun and the moon maintain an ordered world, interrelated but distinct. And so too human beings also exercise their dominion in preserving, cultivating and separating the ordered world as a coherent but related whole. How the sun and moon exercise their "rule" over the sky establishes how rulers in this role contribute to the meaning of dominion for humans as guardians of order.

Human beings specifically exercise dominion over “the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” The wording of the commandment for dominion emphasizes the organization of the animal world. Human beings do not have dominion over just the fish, but the “fish of the sea,” and not just the animals but, “every living thing that moves upon the earth.” They exercise dominion over categories of

creatures and order, not just animals as a broad group. God created order as creation moved from chaos to complexity, and the constant reiteration of that order emphasizes its importance. To rightly and justly exercise dominion means to recognize the created order and its complexity.

Along with dominion God tells human beings to “fill the earth and subdue it” in 1:28. The mandates for dominion and to subdue are very similar because both ask for a ruler to protect creation from returning to chaos by maintaining and cultivating the interrelationships. Subduing the earth involves suppressing a return to chaos by defending the land’s relationships and organization.

Understanding dominion and subduing the earth as a mandate to protect creation awards human beings with a very specific role in creation. Human beings must actively work within creation to cultivate the interrelationships so the relationships are resilient against a tendency toward chaos. Human beings must strengthen the diversity of life and habitats in creation, because it is our inescapable mandate as holders of dominion. According to this reading we cannot be human beings without dominion, and this reading of Genesis 1 binds us to practice dominion as caretakers of the environment. With an understanding of what dominion is, the question of how human beings exercise dominion becomes essential.

Verse 1:27 recounts the creation of human beings, “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” In the image of God, human beings possess traits unique to the God in Genesis 1. In this text, God alone speaks, sees, and creates the whole world, using sight to recognize the groupings as “good.” Speech plays a prominent role in this text foreshadowing all actions, such as verse 1:3, “Then God said “Let there be light”; and there was light.” Speech plays an essential role in the power to create

because it demonstrates forethought and ability to actualize that thought. First God uses speech to describe a new element for creation, then it becomes manifest. The act of speech narrates what God desires in the world. Once the image has been spoken, God has the power to ensure it will exist. In this reading, speech and agency form two of the attributes of God passed onto human beings. Both of these attributes give human beings the power to actively rule in creation and effectively protect the relationships .

Sight is the other important attribute of God in Genesis 1. After the completion of each grouping, God looks at what was made before calling it “good.” These moments of sight involve more than mere looking. It is a kind of recognition that takes stock of the world. Sight allows God to recognize the complex web of relationships in creation in the view of the world as “very good.” In verse 1:29-30 God prompts human beings to see the relationships. But God also prompts human beings to recognize the relationships by telling them, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed...” thereby showing them *how* to use their capacity for sight. They must use their sight to recognize the relationships and interconnections, so they may understand the world over which they are they are charged to exercise dominion.

Human beings play an essential role in creation according to Genesis 1. They fit into a “good” and interconnected world to maintain those relationships. Created in the image of God, human beings have a particular capacity for speech, agency and recognition of creation to assist them in exercising dominion. As human beings, we practice a dominion which involves seeing the bigger picture of how the different parts of the world relate to each other and recognize how these relationships are good. If any part of the bigger picture is damaged the whole system will suffer and the relationships which prevent a return to chaos will weaken. Human beings must

use their capacity for speech and agency to protect the environment. This reading of Genesis 1 helps human beings to understand their environmental work as a part of their greater mandate to protect God's interconnected creation.

The Practice of Dominion

The reading of Genesis 1 presented here describes a world of relationships with human beings as stewards of those relationships. This reading can benefit religious environmental groups of all kinds by deepening their religious connection to their environmental work. For groups working on preservation of wild lands or green energy, the view of dominion as an inescapable mandate could strengthen their connection to the spiritual meaning in their work. In addition to the explicit environmental aspects of seeing interrelationships when exercising dominion, the health of those relationships mandates human beings take care of each other. One cannot exercise dominion over the world if basic human needs are not met. This reading will be the most beneficial for religious groups working on environmental issues when human health is at stake because only by protecting human beings and the environment together can both be saved in the long term.

Within environmentalism there is a constant tension between helping humans and helping the environment, which Cone characterizes as a perception that “white people care more about the endangered whale and spotted owl than they do about the survival of young blacks in our nation’s cities.”¹⁷ Both of these examples remind us of the polarized situations created when people feel a standoff between human survival and nature’s survival.

¹⁷ Cone, 24

Though not a race issue, the case of the spotted owl in Washington State in the late 1980s demonstrates an intensely polarized situation between the timber industry and the environmentalists. Many of the loggers in small rural towns lost their jobs as the mills closed because protection of the spotted owl's habitat dramatically reduced their access to forestland. Naturally, this led to intense alienation of the loggers. A volatile situation arose between them and the environmentalists, both were doing everything possible to protect their own interests. The concepts in Genesis 1 would help overcome the tension by seeing that as part of creation both the parties who are fighting for their survival are "good," and the interconnections between them shows they both need protection. To overcome the polarization both groups would listen to each others needs and work toward a compromise. Loggers would explain their need for jobs in the remote rural areas. The environmentalists would explain the need to save the spotted owl. Through the interconnected view of creation both groups would see the importance of the other and diffuse the polarized situation. They would work to find a scenario that would give the loggers jobs and the spotted owls a habitat. Both parties are members of God's creation and human dominion mandates we recognize them and protect them both.

For human beings to exercise dominion justly, we must respond to our basic instinct to take care of each other. As ecofeminist theologian Ivone Gebara describes,

For us human beings, clearly, it is our own species that matters the most. We do not hesitate in choosing whether to save a nest of baby birds or a human child: Human beings automatically move to save the child, as the bird struggles to save her offspring. This is a biological matter: It is instinctive in all animals.¹⁸

As God prompting humans to see the different parts of creation illustrates, how the world is interrelated, creating a deep connection between the well being of both human beings and the

¹⁸Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 29.

environment. A narrow focus on either human beings or the environment has a detrimental effect on the other. In fact, human beings can only practice dominion if we take care of each other. When we neglect human beings we force people to choose between the environment and their survival because there are in stressed situations with limited options.

Religious groups working on issues of environmental racism would benefit the most from this reading because the reading speaks to their concern for the environment and human health. Environmental racism is both an environmental issue and a civil rights issue because the environment is used as a weapon to express racist attitudes¹⁹. Complicating these situations, the factories and dump sites supply much needed jobs to the communities which they pollute. Similar to the situation in the northwest the loggers and the spotted owl, people must often choose between feeding their families or protecting their health and environment. These conflicts do not suggest any simple answers. This understanding of dominion offers a way to approach these issues from a religious grounding which the discussion of environmental racism illustrates by developing the role of human being as care takers of diversity with the capacity for speech, agency and recognition.

A strong and active movement exists in the United States to fight environmental racism. The movement originated in the tradition of the civil rights movement and its connection with churches. Though poor and minority populations have suffered from environmental degradations for a considerable amount of time, it did not become a recognized movement until the 1980s. Religious groups have taken a lead in this movement. In 1987 the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice released a report titled, “ Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of

¹⁹ Bryant, 5.

Communities Surrounding Hazardous Waste Sites.”²⁰ This report was the first to formally recognize the connection between the incidence of race and environmental toxins. At this time Dr. Benjamin Chavis of the United Church of Christ coined the term, “Environmental Racism,” and the movement became clearly identified as a bridge between the race and class struggle and environmentalism.

As described earlier, the landmark case of people fighting against companies taking advantage of poor and minority groups for toxic dumping occurred in Warren County, North Carolina in “the most African-American area of the state.”²¹ The movement began when the church women lay down in the road to prevent dumping of oil containing PCBs. In 1980, Warren County was 66% black, with 32% of the whole population and 90% of the black population under the poverty line.²² The Ward Transfer Company dumped 30,000 gallons of PCB laced oil along 210 miles of the Warren County roadways before the EPA forced them to clean it up. The clean up process only perpetuated the exploitation of local residents because the toxic landfill site “made more political sense than environmental sense.”²³ With knowledge of the facts, placement of the landfill seems absurd because “the water table of Afton, North Carolina (the site of the landfill) is only 5-10 feet below the surface, and residents of the community derive all their drinking water from local wells... it is only a matter of time before the PCBs end up in these people’s wells.”²⁴

²⁰ Charles Lee, “Toxic Waste and Race in the United States,” in *Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards: A Time for Discourse*, ed Bunyan Bryant and Paul Morgan, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), 10

²¹ Bryant, 68

²² Robert Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie :Race, Class, and EnvironmentalQuality*. 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 33

²³ Bullard, 30.

²⁴Ibid, 30-31.

Outraged at the injustice, Dr. Charles Cobb, the director of the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice, led the community, political leaders and civil rights activists to protest the new landfill. Within two weeks 414 protesters were arrested following the directive from Cobb that "we cannot allow this national trend to continue. If it means every jail in this country must be filled, then I say let it be. The deposition of toxic waste within the black community is no less than attempted genocide."²⁵ They could not stop the landfill but they received attention from the head of the EPA's hazardous waste implementation branch and the rest of the country. They set a precedent for others to speak out when their community becomes similarly endangered. The close involvement of religious groups shows the environmentalist reading of dominion could deepen their engagement with the issue. As they protect their communities from toxic health hazards they can connect with their religious identity by understanding their activist work as an expression of dominion.

The inequality found in Warren County was not an isolated incident. The housing development Atlgeld Gardens, in the Southside of Chicago, sits in the middle of several toxic waste sites. Residents call it a "toxic donut" because more than fifty toxic waste dumps surround this housing development.²⁶ This community suffers from the highest cancer rate in the city and a survey of 825 residents showed sixty-eight percent had health problems which disappeared when they left the neighborhood, and thirty seven percent "cited noxious odor as their most common complaint."²⁷ This dumping occurred in a community where seventy-two percent of

²⁵Ibid, 31.

²⁶Hazel Johnson, "Surviving Chicago's "Toxic Doughnut,"" in *People of Color Environmental Groups, 2000 Directory*, (Atlanta: Environmental Resource Center, 2000), 26.

²⁷ Ibid, 26.

the population identify themselves as an underrepresented minority.²⁸ Numerous examples like these demonstrate clearly how poor and minority groups are disproportionately affected by environmental problems.

Environmentalists and religious leaders must face the real and active problem of environmental racism. Churches already have an extensive organizational capacity and an active presence in many of the communities that deal with environmental racism, and they have proved to be integral in fighting these issues. The 1987 report released by the United Church of Christ revealed that “issues of race and class are the most important determinants of where hazardous waste facilities are placed.”²⁹ For example, “the nation’s largest hazardous waste landfill, receiving toxic materials from 45 states and several foreign countries, is located in predominantly African American and poor Sumter County in the heart of the Alabama Black Belt.”³⁰ In the predominately African American and Hispanic Southside of Chicago lies the greatest concentration of hazardous waste sites in the nation.³¹ It took the United Church of Christ to bring these facts to national attention.

Surprisingly, the United Church of Christ report does not mention religion in a meaningful way. The report predominantly functions as a secular document to discuss the reality of environmental racism. The only discussion of religion appears in a section titled “Conclusions and Recommendations.” This section contains recommended actions for the following organizations: “Federal Government, State Governments, Municipalities, Churches

²⁸ Benjamin F Chavis Jr., *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States*, (New York: United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, 1987), Appendix B Table B-9.

²⁹ Lee, 10.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 13.

³¹ *Ibid*, 13.

and Community Organizations, and Others.”³² The five recommendations for Churches and Community Organizations focus on community outreach and investigating sources of toxic waste. This report portrays churches playing an organizational role but they do not influence the expression of the activism. They utilize the structure of activism built for the civil rights movement. This interpretation of dominion will construct a response to environmental racism that directly deals with the racism aspect of the issue and will not appeal to the religious environmental aspect of it. Dominion’s recognition of interrelationships incorporates both environmental and civil rights elements in environmental racism, and providing a way to address environmental racism with Biblical language.

The environmentalist reading of Genesis 1 presented here supports preexisting ideas in the civil rights movement and will bring new approaches. One of the most important aspects of the environmentalist reading of dominion shows the world as an interconnected system when God recognizes the final vision as “very good.” Interrelationships and interdependence form the most basic principal of ecological thought throughout the environmental movement. Ecologist Rachel Carson describes how “it is not possible to add pesticides to water anywhere without threatening the purity of water everywhere. Seldom if ever does Nature operate in closed and separate compartments, and she has not done so in distributing the earth’s water supply.”³³ In 1967 Martin Luther King Jr. echoed similar sentiments in the civil rights context when he said, “...all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. We are made to

³² Chavis, 26.

³³ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962), 42.

live together because of the interrelated structure of reality.”³⁴ James Cone shares this sentiment in his article “Whose Earth is it, Anyways?” He argues that environmentalism and the fight against racism are far more similar than one might think, and “their separation from each other is unfortunate because they are fighting the same enemy—human beings’ domination over each other and nature.”³⁵ The interdependent view clearly shows that “the fight for justice cannot be segregated, but must be integrated with the fight for life in all its forms.”³⁶ Recognition of creation from verses 1:29-30 is essential to dominion and embraces the conception of the world as interrelated and extends it by understanding the relationships as a product of God’s creation, thus giving the preexisting idea a religious backing.

The reading of Genesis 1 presented here also contains other aspects of civil rights and environmental action and develops their ideas with a slightly different twist. From this reading dominion is inescapable. Our exercise of dominion is inherent in our existence as human beings. We rule over the world no matter what we do, reading the text closely provides an approach for a right and just dominion. Human beings were created in the image of God and endowed with God-like abilities for the exercise of dominion such as speech, agency, and recognition.

Speech in Genesis 1 allows God to express what will be created. Speech for human beings allows us to have a vision of what we believe should exist. We have the capacity to envision a right and just world. This ability allows activists to picture poor neighborhoods without toxic waste. Where everyone receives equal access to clean drinking water and clean air. Our speech enables us to envision and discuss a world that meets everyone’s needs. By

³⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., “A Christmas Sermon of Peace”, in *The Trumpet of Conscience*, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1967), 69

³⁵ Cone, 24.

³⁶ Cone, 23.

sharing our vision of a better world with other people we can create a vision of the world that incorporates a diversity of needs and approaches to the environment. Speech from Genesis 1 allows people to communicate and organize so they can form a larger group to share that vision of how the world should be.

Following the capacity for speech, human beings are also endowed with the capacity for agency. We possess the ability to take an active role in the world and with the power bestowed in creation effect change. The capacity for speech thus allows human beings to have a vision of a better world and then act on that vision to actually create a better world. Agency is an important element of this reading's contribution to religious environmental groups because it reinforces their capacity to win the case. Human beings' have the capacity to effect change because they are created in the image of God. Activism exercises this capacity and connects people to their creation and connection with God. Environmentalism can be especially daunting for small environmental groups because frequently they must fight corporations who have full time staff working to protecting their economic interests. Fighting against these corporations because it is ones duty as a human being in the image of God reinvigorates the mandate to protect creation. The capacity for agency in Genesis 1 reminds religious environmental groups that they have the power to effect change even when faces with a challenging situation.

Recognition of the world allows God to "see" what is "good" and "very good" and how the parts interrelate to each other. In verses 1:29-30 God prompts human beings to "see" in a similar way. With the capacity to see the world as interconnected human beings can recognize how each part of the world relates to the rest of the world. We can recognize how damaging one

element of the world affects the rest. In her crusade against pesticides Rachel Carson used her capacity for recognizing the relationships in the world and saw

Several hundred species of wild bees take part in the pollination of cultivated crops— 100 species visiting the flowers of alfalfa alone. Without insect pollination, most of the soil-holding and soil-enriching plants of uncultivated area would die out, with far-reaching consequences to the ecology of the whole region.³⁷

Recognition of the bigger picture of the world allows human beings to actually see how the world interrelates and makes us genuine rulers because we have the capacity to see the world and the impact of our actions.

All of these abilities can be used to enact a vision of a better world in which human beings are treated equally and where they can perform their duty of taking care of the environment. These two parts are interrelated because for humans to be treated equally, everyone needs a clean environment. Equality and basic needs for humans allows us to look to our inescapable duty to exercise dominion.

Recognition of interrelationships reminds human beings that their vision for a better neighborhood is a small part of the larger world. All of God's creation encompasses the oceans, and the sky, the sun and moon, plants, the fish the birds, the animals and humans. Each person's life is a small part of the bigger whole. The interdependence and definition of good of the land animals emphasize the importance of diversity. In fact, the strength of the diversity dictates how healthy God's creation is and how well human beings are exercising their dominion. God created human beings initially to protect the world from a return to chaos and we must see ourselves in this bigger context.

³⁷ Carson, 73

Before nature displayed any indication of returning to chaos human beings turned and attacked the very relationships we are meant to protect. The environmental problems we face today are due to human beings' disrespect for the environment and each other. Religion must play a critical role in the environmental movement to by cultivating cosmologies such as recognition of interrelationships, which promote sound environmental practices. Technological advances in conservation alone, will only change the expression of environmental and racial oppression. If technology combines with a serious change in environmental ethics then a true change is possible. Understanding dominion as a mandate to protect diversity could assist this change in environmental ethics.

Environmental Racism in Chester, Pennsylvania

One of the places in dire need of change is Chester, Pennsylvania, which is the home of three toxic waste processors and has the highest infant mortality rate in the state.³⁸ Charles Lee, the Chairperson of the National Environmental Justice Advisory Committee to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), described Chester as “the worst case of environmental racism he’s ever seen.”³⁹ Chester is located fifteen miles southeast of Philadelphia in the southern part of Delaware County. The economic disparity between Chester and other towns in the county such as Haverford Township is shocking. In Chester 27.2% of the population lives below the poverty line, while only 3.7% of the population in Haverford lives below the poverty line. Haverford lies only eighteen miles to the north of Chester.

³⁸ Chester Environmental Justice Factsheet:Public Health, April 1996, <<http://www.ejnet.org/chester/factsheet.html>>, April 10, 2004.

³⁹Mike Ewall, “Environmental Racism in Chester,” July 1999, <http://www.ejnet.org/chester/ewall_article.html> April 10, 2004.

Before the current hardships Chester was once a booming industrial town situated perfectly as an industrial port on the Delaware River. In the post war era from 1950-1980 the economy collapsed as the manufacturers moved away and thirty-two percent of the jobs disappeared.⁴⁰ Those who could moved away leaving a predominately African-American community.⁴¹ From 1910 to 1965, bootlegger John McClure and the Republican Party ruled the town, dominating so completely that “a paper in 1967 noted that, when asked why they voted for machine candidates, most African-Americans responded that it was so they would be able to get a job.”⁴² McClure was succeeded by local mobster Jack Nacrelli, and when he went to jail in 1985 his secretary took over.⁴³ These corrupt mayors excluded local citizens from participating in government. These factors combined to allow several waste processing plant to move into Chester in the last several years with promises of desperately needed jobs.

In reality the waste processors brought only a few jobs and many hazards that the residents of Chester must pay for with their health. In a small area Chester hosts a waste incinerator, a wastewater and sewage treatment facility, and a medical waste treatment facility. There are three waste processing plants. The garbage incinerator is the seventh largest in the country and burns the entirety of Delaware County’s municipal solid waste.⁴⁴ In addition more than half the waste burned in Chester comes from all over Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York,

⁴⁰ Kelly Morgan, “The History of Chester,” Feb 1998, <<http://www.ejnet.org/chester/history.html> April 10, 2004.

⁴¹ The population dropped from 66, 000 to 42, 000 and the African-American proportion grew from 20% to 65% (Morgan)

⁴² Morgan

⁴³ Morgan

⁴⁴ Ewall

Delaware, and Ohio. The unsorted waste is burned at high temperatures generating heat, which is converted to electricity, and leaving behind fine ash and air pollution.⁴⁵

The DELCORA Waste Treatment Facility treats 36 million gallons of wastewater and sewage every day. Twenty percent of their capacity comes from most of the sewage water from Delaware County. The other eight percent is industrial waste water which is high in petroleum and much more toxic than municipal waste. When they process the wastewater a toxic sludge remains which they burn, releasing toxins into the air of Chester.

The third and most offensive of the three plants is Thermal Pure Industries medical waste treatment facility. This corporation shows no respect for the resident of Chester. In July of 1998 they left thirty-three trucks of medical waste sitting outside for four days when the plant shut down. It is illegal to leave medical waste unrefrigerated for twenty-four hours, leaving it for four day in close proximity to a residential area is absurd. Permits were granted for two soil remediation sites in Chester in addition to the preexisting plants.

The town of Chester has paid dearly for the minimal jobs and revenue gained from these plants. Swarthmore College Professor Mark Wallace's account of his first visit to Chester paints a chilling picture of desolation:

The first thing I noticed upon arriving in Chester was the smell: waves of noxious fumes enveloped me like the stench of rotting meat. Next I felt the bone-jarring rumble of giant eighteen-wheel trash trucks, dozens of trucks from all over the mid-Atlantic and eastern seaboard, bearing down on the residential streets where I was walking with tons of trash—trash which I knew contained everything from toxic chemicals and contaminated soil to sewage sludge and body parts. Then I remembered looking to the horizon and seeing the destination of these terrible truck convoys: a line of giant chemical and waste processing plants belching putrid smoke—like Blake's dark Satanic mills—tightly interspersed among the homes and churches and businesses of Chester residents.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Andy Murray, "Waste Treatment Facilities in Chester," Jan 1999, <<http://www.ejnet.org/chester/facilities.html>>, April 10, 2004.

⁴⁶ Mark Wallace, "The Wounded Spirit as the Basis for Hope," in *Christianity and Ecology*, ed Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 63.

This devastating account describes the daily life of Chester residents, leading to a mortality rate and a lung cancer rate sixty percent higher than other communities in Delaware County. The EPA found sixty percent of Chester children had blood-lead levels over the maximum recommended level. Particularly dangerous in children, elevated lead levels can cause “lowered intelligence, reading and learning disabilities, impaired hearing, reduced attention span, hyperactivity, and antisocial behavior.”⁴⁷

In spite of the challenges of poverty, the health effects became too extreme for Chester residents to ignore and they began fighting back to protect their community. The reading of Genesis 1 presented here will support some of their work and may offer some new ideas. In 1992 Chester Residents Concerned for Quality of Living (CRCQL) formed and has challenged against the corporations. The success of the group demonstrates their capacity for speech and belief in their power to change their situation. The capacity for speech and agency supports what they are already doing because they are exercising their ability to organize and articulate their vision to a group. The capacity for agency empowers them by offering a religious reminder that they are not powerless, instead they have a mandate to act. The verses 1:29-30 when God tells the first human beings to see the world illustrate our capacity to recognize the interconnections and how the pollution effects both human beings and the environment. The people of Chester must take care of their community so that they can also take care of the environment which is dying along with the people.

⁴⁷ Environmental Protection Agency, “Concentrations of Lead in Blood,” July 2003
<http://yosemite.epa.gov/oceph/ochpweb.nsf/content/blood_lead_levels.htm>, April 10, 2004.

Chairperson of CRCQL Zulene Mayfield sees herself as “merely a resident who is fed up with the pollution, corruption, and injustice in the Chester community.”⁴⁸ This reading would help her and other people who feel the same way to identify themselves as environmentalists and also as caretakers of their communities. Through the idea of interconnection they would see they are part of a much bigger network of people working on environmental issues. They would also see that dominion involves all people protecting the environment, and they are working on just a little piece of that. They fit into a single patchwork of a huge quilt of people working to protect the interconnected relationships God established in the world.

Conclusion

Genesis 1 deals with fundamental questions of how we were created and our purpose in the world. Understanding dominion as a mandate to protect the world creates an environmentalist lens for viewing the rest of the Bible. The Book of Genesis is a basic building block in Biblical cosmology. A shift in the understanding of dominion will influence other texts within the tradition. This lens uncovers Christianity’s powerful potential for environmentalism.

This shift in Christianity is necessary because, as the accounts of environmental racism illustrate, we have exhausted the world to a point of crisis. Our health depends on a clean environment which is rapidly disappearing. For this reason dominion offers assistance to religious groups in finding an approach to environmental issues by mandating protection of the diversity of life on earth.

⁴⁸ “Environmental Justice Case Study: Toxic Waste in Chester, Pennsylvania” <<http://www.umich.edu/~snre492/polk.html>> , April, 12, 2004.

Humans have used the agency and power bestowed upon them in Genesis 1 but frequently did not accept the responsibility connected to those powers. Selectively acting in the image of God, human beings have made progress toward destroying the world God created. We have designed a network of retail and industrial corporations which produce waste of all sorts which make the environmental degradations seem inescapable.

The capacity for sight and recognition bestowed upon human beings in the image of God assists them to see the interdependent relationships on both a local and global scale. On the local scale we can see how our actions affect our neighbors. On a global scale we can see how our consumer practices create unnecessary amounts of waste. We can also see how buying organic vegetables supports environmentally aware farmers. Our personal impacts on the rest of the world become evident as our dominion prompts us to look for them.

In fact, with our awareness of interrelationships we can see that we are the people of Chester, all of us. Through our interrelationships we realize that what pollutes Chester also pollutes us. The waste we produce does not disappear into an abyss but directly impacts the lives of other people just like ourselves. Once the recipients of our trash become real people, one cannot ignore our impact on them.

In this view of an interrelated world we realize that the atrocities in Chester are not isolated incidents. In fact they are just a manifestation of a larger problem. The waste processed there originates in states all over the region, including New York, Delaware, and New Jersey. If Chester were to be cleaned up and the waste processors were to leave, the waste would continue to accumulate until new processors were built. Most likely the new processors would pollute yet another poor, minority area and continue the problem of environmental racism.

The only way to truly help the people of Chester is to change our approach to the environment and alleviate the need for waste processors. Adoption and practice of an environmentalist approach to dominion on a large scale will help reduce the source of waste and toxic hazards that pollute communities across the globe through a change in human's waste production. From the awareness of a broad view of interrelationships, people would realize the important role human beings play in protecting the complex relationships. People would see that the styrofoam coffee cup they throw away at their home will end up at the Chester incinerator and then in the air, then in the lungs of the local residents. We can only focus on our duty to be stewards for God's creation if our basic needs are met so people would see the connection between humanitarian and environmental work as two essential contributions to the world. Our creation in the image of God empowers humans to use their capacity for speech and recognition to act. Right action will determine whether or not we save the environment and ourselves from complete destruction.

We are not powerless in the face of the environmental crisis. Slowly but surely communities are reclaiming their neighborhoods, and polluted rivers are being cleaned up. In Chester over the last eight years they have prevented expansions and development of new plants.⁴⁹ They are speaking out against the pollution and gaining support of people outside their community. Their speech and action corresponds to the speech and action in the image of God. Connecting what they are already doing to dominion enriches their actions by giving them a religious identity and strength which will empower them. Simply by deciding to stand up for

⁴⁹ "Accomplishments of C-4 and the Chester Residents Concerned for Quality Living" June 1998, <<http://www.ejnet.org/chester/accomp.html>> , April 12, 2004

their rights the residents of Chester have begun the most challenging aspect of the struggle against environmental racism. Similar symbols of hope exist across the country.

The concepts in Genesis 1 of dominion, the different definitions of “good,” the interrelationships and the unique human capacities from our creation in the image of God can enrich not only just environmental work but our role in the world. By pointing out the relationships between all living creatures and the earth we become aware of our place within this complex web and respect all of the parts. Each of these parts deserves respect both for its place in the interconnection and its contribution to the world for God saw each part of creation as “good.” By situating ourselves within all these relationships with respect for each element we become more sensitive to our impact on them. This realization is integral to our dominion and will inspire people to change their behavior to incorporate their new cosmology.

On a winter day in the South Side of Boston a community garden offers the passer-by frost wilted kale and tomato plants. Across the street from a housing project and in a poor neighborhood, this garden represents efforts to cultivate a better environment in an urban setting. It demonstrates the community reclaiming the communal space. If the garden did not exist, human behavior specialist Dr. Felton Earls speculates it would become a “breeding ground for rats and drug dealers.” The community involvement in this neighborhood will prevent that, signified by a homemade sign on the garden’s fence which reads: “Please respect our efforts.”⁵⁰ Earls’ comprehensive study of the roots of crime found “the most important influence on a neighborhood’s crime rate is the neighbor’s willingness to act, when needed for one another’s benefit, and particularly for the benefit of one another’s children.”⁵¹ Religious groups have taken

⁵⁰ Hurley, Dan, “On Crime as Science (a Neighbor at a Time),” *New York Times*, 6, January, 2004.

⁵¹ Ibid

a lead in this initiative. Earls attributes Boston's dramatic drop in homicide rate from 151 in 1991 to 35 in 2004 to a group of African-American ministers named the Ten-Pont Coalition who took kids off the streets and engaged the kids in after school programs. Their willingness to act as a community saved Boston from a dangerous reality.

Earls' findings apply to environmental work and the environmental approach to dominion as well. Organizing the community around an issue will bring new life into the community, which will enhance the strength of their neighborhood and the strength of the relationships which dominion calls on us to protect. Due to the organizational aspect of environmentalism, religious groups can be very effective for long lasting struggles environmental rights. Dominion which mandates both recognition of the interrelationships, and action in the image of God through sight, speech and action will enliven and guide these groups to protect the world we live in. It will provide them with Biblical grounding for work on environmental issues.

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Acknowledgements

To Professor Ken Koltun-Fromm I offer my unending gratitude for his continual support, patience, and questions.

To my parents Mary and Frank Stowell, thank you so much for helping me through this process as only ones parents can

To Heidi Witmer, who first introduced me to the study of religion, thank you for consistently expanding my vision.

To Amalie Andrew, thank you for doing the dishes.

To Erica Smith, thank you for your support and love. Our chickens are growing up so fast.