

LOREN WILKINSON**Christianity and the Environment:
Reflections on Rio and Au Sable**

The United Nations 'Earth Summit' last year in Rio was an ambitious attempt to address serious environmental issues in an international forum; opinions differ on its success, but one obvious feature of the summit was its recognition that environmental problems are also spiritual problems. The underlying spirituality of the earth summit was, however, a vague monism which affirmed little more than the sacredness of the earth. Though there was little attempt at the Earth summit to address environmental issues from a Christian basis, a later international meeting of Christian environmentalists and theologians at the Au Sable Institute in Michigan made significant progress in articulating a Biblical basis for addressing the complex issues of environment and development. One achievement of the Au Sable forum was the formation of an International Evangelical Network.

Keywords: Environment, Earth Summit, Au Sable, Creation.

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), popularly known as 'the Earth Summit' was held in Rio de Janeiro the first two weeks of June, 1992. It may have been the largest sustained conference ever held. About 35,000 people attended (at least 10,000 of them journalists.) It was really two conferences: a high-level UN conference in which representatives from over 160 nations met to try to come to agreement on a 600-page statement of principles and objectives called AGENDA 21. This government conference met at Rio Centro, a huge, tightly guarded conference complex an hour outside of the city. The other part of the Earth Summit was 'The Global Forum'. It was a meeting of 'NGO's'—non-governmental associations. The Global Forum met—with less money, more ingenuity and (quite possibly) more success—in an old hotel on Rio's beach-front, and a series of temporary, tent-like structures in a beach-side park in downtown Rio.

The Earth Summit was called to address a whole range of serious problems in the health of the earth. It followed by 20 years the first United Nations Conference on the Environment, which met at Stockholm in 1972. The accelerating nature of the problems which it hoped to address was symbolized by a 'clock' outside the Rio Centro complex. One dial registered increase in world population. During the two weeks of the conference it increased by over 3 million, to over 5,467,000,000. The other dial registered decrease in arable land. During the conference that figure decreased by nearly 100,000 hectares. As the 1993 *State of the World* report puts it:

During the 20 years since Stockholm, farmers have lost nearly 500 billion tons of topsoil through erosion at a time when they were called on to feed 1.6 billion additional people. Atmospheric concentrations of CO₂, the principle greenhouse gas, climbed 9%.¹

The title of the conference—the UN Conference on *Environment and Development*—was drawn from an extensive study published in 1987 under the title of *Our Common Future: The UN Report on Environment and Development*. As the title suggests, the premise of that study was that the issues of ‘environment’—non-human creation, earth, air, water, plants and animals—cannot easily be separated from issues of *development*. We will not have a flourishing human civilization on a dying planet. That premise certainly fits the fullest Biblical pictures of *shalom*, the vision of harmony between God, man and earth presented variously in Gen. 1, in Psalm 104, in the last chapters of Isaiah, and in New Testament passages about the New Heaven and the New Earth.

But there was little *shalom* in Rio when the nations of the earth met to talk about how to establish that peace. Much anger centered on successful attempts by developed nations—especially the United States—to rob potentially binding documents of any real force. The climate treaty, for example, had all timetables for restricting carbon emissions removed at U.S. insistence. And the U.S. refused to sign the treaty protecting biological diversity.

In general, a recurring disagreement ran through the days of debate and discussion. On one side were the ‘developed’ nations, whose concern for biological diversity and the state of the ozone layer often seemed elitist to the other side, those ‘developing’ nations struggling to meet basic human needs. This came to the surface often in the Brazilian venue of the meeting: resentment that northern countries (whose virgin forests are almost gone) should presume to tell Brazil what to do with its rain forest; or a march on the beachside forum from the slums above the city, with banners proclaiming that the real environmental problems have to do with starving children.

Underneath these disagreements over issues, however, one of the most significant features of the Earth Summit was its religious nature. For a decade and a half now the so-called ‘deep ecology’ movement has argued that environmental problems cannot be met by the ‘shallow environmentalism’ of technical fixes. Rather, they are the result of spiritual problems, and must be met by spiritual solutions. Thus the Earth Summit was a quasi-religious conference—especially at the more populist Global Forum, which reflected a variety of post-modern gropings toward a new religion.

The religious dimension was evident in much of the language and symbolism. At the center of the Forum, for example, was a stage with a large, globe-shaped abstract tree called ‘The Tree of Life’. Phrases like

¹ Lester Brown, ‘A New Era Unfolds’ in *State of the World 1993*, London, W. W. Norton & Co., 1993, p. 4.

'saving the planet', 'saving the world', and 'saving the earth' were abundant, as were calls for 'spiritual' revolution.

Though scores of religious groups were represented at the Forum (very few of them Christian), they were generally held together by a loose philosophy of basic monism. This underlying religious position was well-expressed in a manifesto issued the day before the conference began by a body called the 'Sacred Earth Gathering.' This group was led by Hannah Strong, wife of the conference's Canadian organizer Maurice Strong, and was attended by an assortment of religious leaders, including the Dalai Lama. Some of the statements in their declaration are:

... The ecological crisis is a symptom of the spiritual crisis of the human being, resulting from ignorance.

... We must therefore transform our attitudes and values, and adopt a renewed respect for the superior law of Divine Nature.

... Individuals and governments need to evolve 'Earth Ethics' with a deeply spiritual orientation or the earth will cleanse itself of all destructive force.

... We believe that the universe is sacred because all is one.

Three principles stand out in this declaration. One is its premise of basic monism: all is one. Another is that the earth is sacred or divine. A third is that environmental problems are the result of error or ignorance, not sin. What is needed is knowledge and enlightenment. These religious premises were all evident at a massive all-night religious vigil held early in the forum. At the beginning of the vigil, participants were led in warm-up exercises by an Australian musician and follower of Ananda Marga, a missionary Hindu sect. Between verses of the song participants were told to 'listen to the stars'; to 'concentrate on the region between the brows'; to 'imagine a star there, radiating peace'; to 'look at the earth'; 'to think of all of our love going into the earth' as 'though a flame were lit, going down and filling the earth'. The exercise ended with a chanting of 'Om Shantih', a Hindu blessing. This was followed with a 2-hour 'invocation of the Sacred' given by priests and priestesses of some 30 religions (at least half of whom were Brazilian), and then by celebrations in different locations by different religions—participants were encouraged first to go to the religion of their choice, and then to shop around.

The vigil ended, at dawn, with the music of Stravinsky's 'Rite of Spring', the saxophone playing of Paul Winter—who led participants in Wolf Howls, which he called a great 'Howlallelujah chorus'—and an address by the Dalai Lama. The words of this popular leader of world Buddhism are a good indicator of the curiously vague and inward-looking tone of the prevailing religion. His main message was: The problems of the earth come from humanity, so the solution must come from humanity. What is the solution? To have peace of mind—when our mind remains peaceful, then we can handle problems well . . . peace of mind is the source of a brighter

future, and all religions have the potential to give us peace . . . which must be rooted in compassion. Compassion is what matters. This religion or that, believer or non-believer, what matters is compassion . . . Each has the seed of compassion, and must work to realize it . . . When we return home, with peace of mind, the result will be a more calm, balanced inner world, and thus a more calm, balanced outer world. This message was met with wild enthusiasm, dancing, and more chanting of OM SHANTIH.

In general, this was the type of religious atmosphere that prevailed at the forum, while meanwhile at Rio Centro, representatives from the world's governments were giving speeches about their environmental accomplishments and delegates were trying to come to agreement on principles for care of the earth.

What was accomplished at the Earth summit? It is very difficult to say. Looked at one way, nothing at all; looked at another way, a great deal. As one participant put it afterwards: 'Whatever you heard about the earth summit is true.'

Those who speak of the summit's failure point to the watering down of the key accords, or to president George Bush's affirmation of Business as Usual. His speech to UNCED began '20 years ago people spoke of limits to growth; today we recognize that growth is the engine of change and the friend of the environment.' Such statements, say critics, imply no real change in policy among the powerful nations of the earth.

Those who speak of the success of the conference point to the fact that environmental matters are now in the vocabularies and the attention of the world's leaders and bureaucrats to a greater extent than ever before. They also point to the undeniable fact that hundreds of Non-Governmental Organizations are, as a result of the Earth Summit, better organized, more in touch with each other, and in a position to put pressure on governments to live up to what they gave lip service to at Rio.

In all of this political and religious ferment, where were Christians? Three Christian responses were clearly evident.

One was a tendency—mainly by liberal Christian groups—to acquiesce in the overarching religious premise that all is one and all is sacred. In such a setting the Christian 'scandal of particularity' never seemed more scandalous, and there was a shift away from an affirmation of the redeeming power of Christ to an affirmation of the redeeming power of the earth. For example, one delegation from a large American denomination led a demonstration at the UNCED gates, in which the opening was a singing of the Christian Hymn, 'Were you there when they crucified the Lord'—but with the word's changed to 'Were you there when they crucified the earth'.

At the other extreme were the vast majority of Brazilian Christians, who saw little relevance in the environmental issues of the conference, but were very aware of its pantheistic, syncretistic nature. The Brazilian Evangelical Association had representatives at the Forum, but they were there entirely

for evangelism. They effectively and convincingly demonstrated that Christ can deliver individuals from bondage—but there was no mention in their message that the Gospel might be good news as well for a groaning creation. There was very little attempt by Brazilian Christians to address the issues of the conference from a genuinely Christian perspective—indeed the conference was seen by many Christians (not without some reason) as a pagan threat, and in a Sunday service in a nearby church one minister prayed that financial troubles would shut the whole thing down.

In between these two extremes were a few Christian individuals and organizations who were trying to address the vastness of the environmental issues from a genuinely Christian position. The World Council of Churches, after a week-long meeting in the slums, issued a powerful declaration linking salvation in Christ to individual, social, and creational health. World Vision and the Seventh Day Adventists had booths at the Forum and presented a gospel which, while centred on salvation in Christ, did not leave out the rest of creation.

At the same time there were individuals behind the scenes who worked long and hard at the issues out of Christian conviction. Susan Drake, for example, working for the US state department, was a member of the US negotiating team. Two years before, when the planning for the conference had broken down because of intractable disagreements among the organizing body, she got together with representatives from several key countries, asked members of her church to pray, and emerged from a two-day meeting with an agreement to go ahead with the conference. Without her un-sung work there probably would not have been an earth summit. More visibly Senator Al Gore—not yet the U.S. vice-president, or even a candidate—made it very clear that he was involved in the issues out of Christian concern for stewardship of creation.

Yet, on the whole, it would be accurate to say that—apart from the huge statue of Christ the Redeemer on a mountaintop above the city—there was very slight Christian presence at the Earth Summit.

There is, however, a growing network of Christian theologians, scientists, and workers in environment and development who are doing a great deal not only to work on the problems themselves, but to understand the environmental significance of the fact that the Bible repeatedly speaks of the triune God as Maker and Redeemer of 'all things.' About 60 of these Christians with a concern for creation—from 8 countries and 5 continents—met in 1992 at the Au Sable Institute in northern Michigan. The Au Sable Institute for Environmental Studies is a remarkable resource which has developed in the last 20 years as a centre for both in-depth study of the way creation works, and careful, Biblical thought about our relationship to creation. The institute owes its existence and funding (perhaps through a divine sense of humour) to the fact that the former Christian camp where it was located became in the 70's the site of one of the state's most productive oil-wells. An exceptionally far-sighted group of leaders used

the considerable income from the oil to establish and endow a Christian centre for environmental studies. For nearly 15 years, forums at the Au Sable Institute have brought Christians together to work on aspects of a Christian environmental ethic. The meeting last summer, co-sponsored by the Au Sable Institute and the World Evangelical Fellowship, was perhaps the most important of these conferences—in the breadth of its representation, in its proximity to the earth summit, and in its determined attempt to address the same complex of environmental and developmental questions which formed the UNCED agenda.

Out of the Au Sable meeting came not only the formation of an International Evangelical Environmental Network, but the beginnings of a careful theological statement describing the Biblical basis for understanding what it means to 'save the earth.' Some of the salient points of that Biblical and theological statement are these, taken from a working document prepared at the conclusion of the 5-day meeting:

1. *All creatures are deeply intertwined with and dependent on each other, and humans have no right to destroy or despoil other species . . . We affirm that God is indeed distinct from creation, yet deeply involved in it. This involvement arises not from natural necessity (as though the earth were God or part of God) but from the triune God's free love and grace. God the Son, as the eternal Word, gives form to all creatures and became human flesh, with which all creatures are interconnected; while God the Spirit breathes energy into all.*
2. *In the Old Testament, the creation account begins by showing the three-fold relationship between God, creation and humanity. This relationship is later exemplified in the covenant with Israel, which includes the people of Israel, the gift of the land of Israel, and their responsibility for it to God . . . in the New Testament, this triadic relationship of God, people of Israel, and land of Israel is reaffirmed and extended as the triad of God, the new people of God, and the liberation of all creation. God's call to faith in Jesus Christ includes the call to care for and work towards the transformation of all creation.*
3. *Men and Women are called to a special task of caring for creation in a shepherdly manner, since they reflect God's image in a unique way.*
4. *Men and Women participate most fully in God's purposes for creation through personal appropriation of the benefits of Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection, which become present, participatory realities through the Holy Spirit. Essential for this participation is spirituality focussed on Jesus' teaching and his cross, enlivened by the Spirit who moves through creation and connects our yearnings with those of all other creatures.*

This theological framework became the basis for statements of principle about some of the more specific issues which the Earth Summit had also attempted to address. Wealthy over-consumption, hunger, population,

development assistance, the disproportionate burden on women, urban growth, technology, farming, wildlife, economics, militarism, and political engagement were all addressed within the framework provided by belief in Christ as Creator and Redeemer. The statement concluded with the affirmation that 'The Earth is the Lord's' (Psalm 24:1), and that 'He [Christ] is before all things, and in him all things hold together.' (Col. 1:17).

The concerns of the Earth Summit and the Au Sable Forum were similar. In both meetings there was an underlying conviction that the environmental problems we are facing cannot be met simply by technological or scientific solutions. But unlike the vague monism of the earth summit—which by dissolving the distinctions between God, people and earth, dissolved any real motive or justification for concern—the robust christian orthodoxy of the Au Sable forum provided a solid foundation for relating 'spirituality' to action. Nowhere was this more evident than in the times of worship at Au Sable—which, unlike the debilitating pantheism of the Global Forum, united people as redeemed sinners, responsible to their creator for their fellow creatures, empowered by the Creator Spirit, known through the cross on which the Creator himself, in Christ, suffered for the life of a suffering creation.

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