

Dominion

That humans have dominion over the Earth, a claim of Abrahamic faiths, has been interpreted as the cause of the contemporary ecological crisis. Other interpretations emphasize that stewardship of the Earth is included in the idea of appropriate dominion. Humans may choose to be conquerors, gardeners, developers, trustees, or caretakers.

The Abrahamic religions affirm a special role for humans in creation. “So God created man in his own image; . . . male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion . . .’” (Genesis 1:27–28, RSV). Famously, historian Lynn White Jr. (1907–1987) laid much of the blame for the ecological crisis on this Judeo-Christian belief in a 1967 article published in the magazine *Science*. The Genesis command had flowered in medieval Europe, licensed the exploitation of nature, and produced science and technology that have resulted in an ecological crisis. Islam has a similar concept: “I am setting on the earth a vicegerent [*khalifah*]” (Quran 2:30).

White’s critics were quick to respond that there were two thousand years between the origins of such belief and these results. Other Biblical passages in Psalms and Job celebrated creation. Greek convictions were important: “Man is the measure of things” (Protagoras). Other factors played more immediate roles: the rise of capitalism, economies of growth, increasing populations, the rise of democracies, and increasing secularization. Liberal capitalist democracy arouses escalating aspirations in its citizen-consumers; by contrast Jesus hardly recommended maximizing consumption. Even White noticed that Eastern Orthodox Christianity did not

develop such dominion attitudes, nor did Saint Francis within Western Christianity.

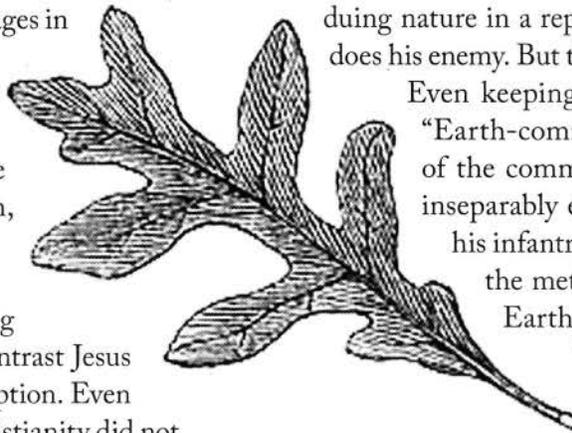
After the fall and disruption of the garden, nature too is corrupted and life becomes a struggle. Nature needs to be redeemed by human labor. Here theology, science, economics, and morality all joined to think that increasing development, thus relieving disease and poverty, is a good thing. For all of human history, humans have been pushing back limits. Life will get better; one should hope for abundance and work toward obtaining it. Humans have more genius at this (more capacity for dominion) than any other species.

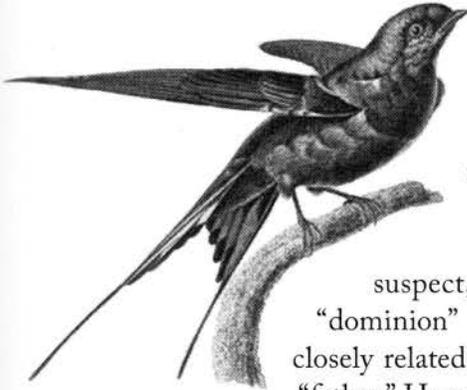
These notions have been built into the Western concept of human rights: a right to self-development, to self-realization. Such an egalitarian ethic scales everybody up. When every individual seeks its own good, there is escalating consumption. When everybody seeks everybody else’s good, there is, again, escalating consumption. White’s article forced serious misgivings about the human dominion of classical and enlightenment Judaism and Christianity.

Theologians have replied that appropriate dominion requires caring for creation. True, there is a sense of dominion that means “Earth-tyrant,” or humans subduing nature in a repressive sense, as a conqueror does his enemy. But there are more positive senses.

Even keeping the military metaphor, an “Earth-commander” finds the interests of the commander and the commanded inseparably entwined, like a general and his infantry. Sometimes one encounters the metaphor of a pilot of spaceship Earth.

The couple was put in the garden “to till and keep it” (Genesis 2:15, RSV).

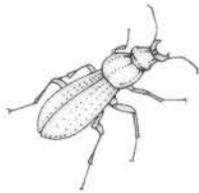




Humans are to be “Earth-gardeners.” Humans are to domesticate Earth; its wildness needs to be tamed, made into a garden, a park, or cultivated. Although paternalism is today rather suspect, the original context of “dominion” (in medieval Europe) was closely related to *dominus*, the Latin for “father.” Humans are an “Earth Father.”

Perhaps the favored model is that of stewardship, although many prefer to speak of humans as Earth-trustees. A steward manages for the benefit of an owner; a trustee cares for that under his or her care. Environmental management appeals to scientists and developers. Hebrews have three different kinds of rulers: humans on Earth are and ought to be prophets, priests, and kings—roles unavailable to nonhumans. Humans should speak for God in natural history, reverence the sacred on Earth, and rule creation in freedom and in love.

The same Genesis stories teach about the human fall into sin. Humans covet and worship false gods; they corrupt their faiths and rationalize in self-deception. Faiths must be ever reformed; humans need their prophets and priests to constrain their kings. The righteous, humane



life balances all three dimensions. Indeed, Christians have often been too anthropocentric. As the ethicist Larry Rasmussen explains, the need for repentance is perennial. Dominion on Earth is human destiny, but it is a fragile destiny.

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