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# Re-Hearing “Every Square Inch”: Anthropocentrism in Neo-Calvinist Rhetoric

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by Howard Schaap

When Lynn White declared in a 1967 essay that “Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen,”<sup>1</sup> he not only sparked debate in the Christian church but also shifted the very way we talk about the environment. While many Christians and even Al Gore have since responded to White’s critique, scholars as a whole have since paid much more attention to the anthropocentrism at the heart of Western culture’s ideas about the natural world. With the publication of *The Ecocriticism Reader* in 1996, literary scholarship, too, has followed White’s lead, captured memorably in Glen A. Love’s condemnation of Western culture’s

apathy toward mounting environmental crises. Love writes, “In the face of profound threats to our biological survival, we continue in the proud tradition of humanism, to...‘love ourselves best of all,’ to celebrate the self-aggrandizing ego and to place self-interest above public interest, even, irrationally enough, in matters of common survival.”<sup>2</sup> In order to remedy this human self-aggrandizement, ecocritics like Love suggest that we need a narrative shift: a shift in the way we read and write, but more importantly a shift in the master narrative of Western culture that decenters humanity and moves away from an over-arching, anthropocentric master narrative, where man is the measure of all things, to an ecocentric narrative, where the environment is at the center of things.

Clearly, even as we look around at current headlines and see concern for “the planet” as a primary theme of newspaper headlines, an attempt at such a narrative shift is under way. However, in twenty-first-century America, we also seem to be at a narrative crossroads. A growing narrative of subservience to “the planet” seems to threaten many American Christians, who in reaction retrench themselves within a narrative tradition that remains subservient to the anthropocentric ideals of progress. It is in this twenty-first-century conflict between anthropocentric and ecocentric narratives that Calvinism has something important to offer. Neo-Calvinism’s emphasis on the centrality of creation would seem to offer a counter narrative that not only rejects the anthropocentric master narrative that has plagued Western civilization, but also offers a palatable earth-friendly narrative to Christians

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who are concerned about blind subservience to “the planet.” However, neo-Calvinism’s repeated critique of Modernism notwithstanding, we must first consider how in the past our neo-Calvinist rhetoric has itself served anthropocentric ends and how we might rehear that rhetoric and thereby reclaim the creation-centrism that is so central to neo-Calvinist thought.

If we are to evaluate neo-Calvinist rhetoric, we must first understand the larger anthropocentric historical narrative, as well as how that narrative affects individuals. In his essay, White contends that the conversion of Europe to Christianity overturned pagan worldviews that were friendlier to nature. White claims that, while in pagan religion, “[b]efore one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated,” “Christianity... not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.”<sup>3</sup> In White’s view, once Christianity broke through the psychic power that nature held over humans, it laid bare the environment for exploitation, a process that continues into the present. To fix this situation will take nothing less, according to White, than a religious paradigm shift.

While some have disagreed with White’s arguments, the point for us to consider is whether or not we can pick up the trail of anthropocentrism in the larger narrative. Especially as we consider Christian attitudes in encountering the American continent and Native American populations, we must realize that both anthropocentrism and Eurocentrism were obviously central to the settlement narrative. In *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Roderick Frazier Nash traces the anthropocentrism of one of the most scrutinized settlement narratives, that of the Puritans and their “city on the hill” ideals. Perhaps inevitably, because of the difficult conditions they faced, the Puritans saw their wilderness wanderings in terms of warfare. Nash summarizes Edward Johnson’s *Wonder-Working Providence* by saying, “Always it was ‘Christ Jesus’ or ‘the Lord’ who ‘made this poore barren Wilderness become a fruitful land’ or who ‘hath...been pleased to turn one of the most Hideous, boundless, and unknown Wildernesses in the world...to a well-ordered Commonwealth.’”<sup>4</sup>

By 1697, the Puritan John Higginson could declare that, through God’s “*blessing* upon their undertakings...a *wilderness* was subdued...Towns erected, and Churches settled...in a place where... [there] had been nothing before but *Heathenism, Idolatry, and Devil-worship*.”<sup>5</sup> Even as they attempted to focus on God’s leading, the Puritans cast themselves as God’s chosen agents, “Christ’s Army” and “Souldiers of Christ,” [sic] in what Nash calls a “war against wilderness” itself.<sup>6</sup>

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By the 1800s, this fight with the wilderness had been transformed into Manifest Destiny, a narrative whose pseudo-religious rhetoric cannot mask its blatant anthropocentrism. William Gilpin, an early governor of Colorado and “trumpeter of America’s Manifest Destiny,” announced bluntly in 1873 that “Progress is God,” and the “occupation of wild territory...proceeds with all the solemnity of a providential ordinance.”<sup>7</sup> Nash claims, “It was, in fact, the ‘hand of God’ that pushed the nation westward and caused the wilderness to surrender to ax and plow. The frontiersmen never forgot that one of their chief aims was the ‘extension of pure Christianity’: they viewed with satisfaction the replacement of the ‘savage yell’ with the ‘songs of Zion.’”<sup>8</sup>

Of course, an alternative to this anthro-

pocentric narrative has always existed within Western culture. The counter narrative can be identified, according to Wendell Berry, by the “theme of settlement, of kindness to the ground, of nurture.”<sup>9</sup> Early voices of this counter narrative include such eccentrics as Henry David Thoreau and John Muir. Thoreau particularly was both critical of farmers who were his contemporaries and prescient about American agricultural tendencies. Thoreau wanted to buy a certain farm he admired “before the proprietor finished getting out some rocks, cutting down the hollow apple trees, and grubbing up some young birches which had sprung up in the pasture, or, in short, had made any more of his improvements”<sup>10</sup>—a term that would have significance in agriculture right up to the present. Thoreau also declared in 1854 that, even then, the American agricultural goal appeared to be to produce “large farms and large crops merely” and that farming was “pursued with irreverent haste and heedlessness by us,” and so “the landscape is deformed” and “husbandry is degraded with us.”<sup>11</sup>

Despite Thoreau’s complaints about agriculture, “improvements” to the landscape went forward, driven by an anthropocentric narrative and rhetoric. “Progress” in American agriculture has largely been marked in the last century by “improvements” to the land, larger farms, improved technology, and greater production. Improving the land most often meant draining wetlands or, conversely, irrigating arid land to bring more land into production. For example, in 1913, in Murray County, Minnesota, the county in which I grew up, a coal-powered steam shovel was shipped in from the East to drain the chain of lakes of which Great Oasis Lake was the crown jewel. Even though Great Oasis, as its name implies, had a somewhat storied place in settlement history—it was the earliest French trading post in southwest Minnesota—Great Oasis would fall to so-called land improvements, as would the accompanying chain of lakes, including Bear, Rush, and Crooked Lakes. Despite some protests from surrounding landowners, voices for the minority narrative, a series of deep ditches was dug that drained the entire chain of lakes out to the Des Moines River.<sup>12</sup> More land had been “reclaimed” in service to the anthropocentric narrative that promoted man’s agency and economic progress.

These types of improvements continued well into the latter half of the century, driven by a new wave of rhetoric that married agricultural production to the Cold War, which is where the narrative reaches my own family. In the early 1980s, in an attempt to make our family farm more profitable and, perhaps subconsciously, to live out both the government farm policies and land-improvement rhetoric he had heard for most of his life, my father straightened a section of our creek. The policies that precipitated this straightening started at least in the 1950s, when then secretary of agriculture Ezra Taft Benson told farmers to “get big or get out.”<sup>13</sup> By the 1970s, “get big or get out” became not just farm policy but, strangely enough, part of foreign policy. As part of a strategy to fight the Cold War, then Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz slung together a whole host of phrases that continued a proud tradition of growth within American agriculture. Besides resurrecting Benson’s earlier phrase “get big or get out,” Butz told farmers to “adapt or die,”<sup>14</sup> he promoted “full production”<sup>15</sup> by planting “fencerow to fencerow,”<sup>16</sup> and most tellingly, he declared “food is weapon.”<sup>17</sup> The plan, apparently, was to out-produce the Soviets and drown them in corn. Along the way, farmers would be forced to update their operations, improve their efficiency, and prove their worth to American agriculture. This process served the dual purpose of eliminating the dross—read “small” and “inefficient” farms and farmers—from the land. To fit the plan, my dad bought a new tractor in the late ’70s but not more land. Therefore, he had to take land where he could get it, and so he straightened about 300 yards of the creek that ran through our farm. Much to my chagrin, the nuance of the creek was completely destroyed. However, my dad had “reclaimed” or “improved” perhaps three more acres on which to plant corn and soybeans. Thus, without purchasing more land, he had still gotten bigger.

“Get big or get out” and “fencerow to fencerow” were in many ways simply the ‘70s manifestation of an anthropocentric narrative that drove so-called “land improvement” projects throughout the American continent, that made the crooked straight and the wet places arable, and that tremendously altered the landscape, often for the worse. Of course, by the time the 1980s rolled

around, much of the overt, pseudo-religious, “Progress is God” rhetoric was gone, replaced by materialist quantifiers and Cold War implications. Still, the result was the same: land improvement, growth, and production as a means of measuring man’s position on and power over the land.

For my dad to resist this Manifest-Destiny, Cold-War master narrative, he would have needed a counter narrative. Since he was not a reader and Thoreau continues to be seen as an eccentric, that tradition was not really an option. However, as a lifelong member of the Christian Reformed

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Church, I would like to think that the narrative and rhetoric of neo-Calvinism generally, and of Abraham Kuyper more specifically, would have been an alternate tradition from which my dad could have benefited, but as I look at the rhetoric of neo-Calvinism, I’m not so sure it offered a real alternative. Neo-Calvinist rhetoric, especially as it would have trickled down to someone like my dad, often remains subservient to progress and anthropocentrism, ensuring that this tradition, too, would be co-opted by the mainstream narrative. This anthropocentric tilt is especially apparent in both Kuyper and the later neo-Calvinist scholar

Al Wolters. However, equally as important to the slant of the rhetoric, I want to point out, is the way we hear this rhetoric from an anthropocentric perspective.

Abraham Kuyper is often noted for being triumphalist in his rhetoric, but in reading the Stone Lectures, I’m struck by how, in his similes and metaphors, Kuyper’s overall orientation fits with the ideals of progress and therefore with the anthropocentrism of Western culture. In his introduction, Kuyper pays tribute to American advancements, saying, “I fully acknowledge the advantage you possess in the fact that...the train of life travels with you so immeasurably faster than with us—leaving us miles and miles behind.”<sup>18</sup> Kuyper’s simile, here, could hardly fit the narrative of progress more precisely: the train is arguably the central symbol of progress and growth in Western culture. Kuyper also uses language that frames Western culture as a kind of competition between Western nations. Kuyper continues, “Although you are outstripping us in the most discouraging way, you will never forget that the historic cradle of your wondrous youth stood in our old Europe, and was most gently rocked in my once mighty Fatherland.”<sup>19</sup> Here, too, we have the narrative of the development of Western civilization, birthed in Europe and blossoming in America. But in what are we “outstripping” Europe but in “creational development,” measured in terms of progress and advancement according to anthropocentric ends? We could read Kuyper’s preference for the “Aryan race rather than Hottentot or Kaffir” in a similar vein.<sup>20</sup> The train of progress, I want to argue, is a dangerous thing, and Kuyper’s rhetoric rides it a bit too often.

Perhaps more to the point, however, is for us to consider how we ourselves may mishear Kuyper’s rhetoric because of the dominance of the master narrative. In other words, how might the fact that we have been steeped in the anthropocentric narrative affect how we hear Kuyper? Perhaps the most famous line spoken by Kuyper comes from his inaugural speech at the Free University, when he declared, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not say, ‘Mine!’”<sup>21</sup> Clearly, Christ is the central agent in this sentence. Without the double negative, the phrase amounts to “Christ, who is sovereign over all, says ‘Mine!’

over every square inch of the whole domain of our existence.” Over time, of course, neo-Calvinists have sometimes taken the rallying cry “Every square inch” from this phrase to the point where it has become a sort of slogan. “Every square inch” as a rallying cry is meant to remind us that everything belongs to God. However, as a slogan the sentence gets reduced to a phrase, with both subject and verb understood. This construction opens the way for multiple misunderstandings. In the best-case scenario, even if we remember that the phrase should be finished “Every square inch belongs to God,” what has grown up, true to the Puritan understanding of wilderness and true to the spiritual warfare understanding of the antithesis, is that, while “every square inch” may belong to God, we as humans are the agents in taking it back for God. In essence, this understanding could shift the phrase and make us, humanity, the subject of the sentence. If we consider both the Reformed emphasis on “reclaiming” or “redeeming” the world and the modern/postmodern emphasis on the subjective self, a likely construction overemphasizes human agency as follows: “We must redeem every square inch.” In many situations, this construction is probably quite legitimate. What I want to argue, however, is that when we come to nature and wilderness, this construction can be problematic because of its overlap with the anthropocentric narrative that has tended to dominate Western culture. It is a short jump to say that “reclaiming” nature means “improving it,” in which case “every square inch” can be made to serve the master narrative.

If in Kuyper’s rhetoric we’re in danger of mishearing “every square inch,” in Wolters’ rhetoric in *Creation Regained* we’re in danger of mishearing “grace restores nature,” not because the phrase has an understood subject but because some of Wolters’ rhetoric also seems to make humanity into the primary bearers of grace for nature. Wolters retains an anthropocentric tone in his rhetoric, especially as it applies to understanding creation and creational “development,” itself a loaded term that may conjure up, among other things, urban sprawl. Near the beginning of Wolters’ discussion of “creational development,” he explains that once God leaves off creating and issues the cultural mandate, humans become responsible for creational development. Wolters writes, “From

now on the development of the created earth will be *societal* and *cultural* in nature. In a single word, the task ahead is civilization.”<sup>22</sup> This language would seem to fit in some ways with White’s claims that “it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.” Clearly, Wolters wouldn’t agree with White’s word “exploit,” but in emphasizing human agency in “creational development,” Wolters’ rhetoric at times seems to have no place for something like wilderness—nature as it exists apart from human activity.

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This lack continues with Wolters’ use of terms like “blueprint.” Wolters writes, “We are called to participate in the ongoing creational work of God, to be God’s helper in executing to the end the blueprint for his masterpiece.”<sup>23</sup> This blueprint, of course, is to be understood through Scripture, but again nature seems to be in service to man’s ends. The human engineering that the term “blueprint” implies also fits with Wolters’ claim that the central progression of the Bible is toward the development of a city. Wolters writes, “Perhaps the most fitting symbol of the development of creation from the primordial past to the eschatological future is the fact that the Bible begins with a garden and ends with a city.”<sup>24</sup> While Wolters qualifies this symbol with his terms “primordial” and “eschatological,” this terminology fits precisely with anthropocentric ideals of progress. As humans, this central metaphor seems to suggest, we must strive toward progress, toward our “city” end. Wolters’ rhetoric in this instance seems to place an undue amount of emphasis on the human development of creation,

leaving out the fact that the Holy City comes down from God and is prepared by Him.

To be sure, Wolters emphasizes that, originally, creation was “unambiguously good”<sup>25</sup> but that sin “touch[es] all” of that creation. Wolters writes, “No created thing is in principle untouched by the corrosive effects of the fall.”<sup>26</sup> As evidence, Wolters cites Genesis 3:17, “Cursed is the ground because of you,” and Romans 8:19-22, a passage that ends with Paul’s declaration that “We know the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.”<sup>27</sup> “Thus,” Wolters concludes, “we learn from Paul that creation in its entirety is ensnared in the throes of antinormativity and distortion, though it will one day be liberated.”<sup>28</sup> Wolters goes on to outline what this “antinormativity and distortion” mean, but, significantly, his examples for fallenness remain primarily in the cultural realm. He only identifies nature’s fallenness as evident in nature’s “bondage to decay” and in a sort of generic “sickness or death or immorality or maladjustments.”<sup>29</sup> The fact that the entire creation remains categorically in the “throes of antinormativity and distortion” enables us to look at creation as categorically fallen and in need of redemption, which presumably we bring as creation “developers.” In essence, this view of nature remains dangerously similar to that of the Puritans, looking out on a wilderness occupied by Satan. Who will set it right but us humans? Clearly, the anthropocentric thrust remains in Wolters’ rhetoric here. He concludes this section in typical territory-claiming terms: “The rightful king has established a beachhead in his territory and calls on his subjects to press his claims even farther in creation.”<sup>30</sup> What must we claim but “every square inch,” “fencerow to fencerow,” from this “poore barren wilderness”?

My point here is that there is too much overlap in the rhetoric between neo-Calvinism and the master narrative of Western culture, especially as we consider how it gets packaged practically for people living on the land. I don’t ever recall hearing the name Abraham Kuyper when I was growing up, but even if, as is likely the case, some of Kuyper’s most famous lines had trickled down to us, I’m not sure that they would have made a difference in terms of my dad’s land management: “Every square inch,” sounds a lot like “fencerow to fencerow.” “Redeem all of life,” another Christian

if not specifically neo-Calvinist slogan, can be made to serve the continued drive to produce more, to find the next horizon, to wring—in absence of the water that has already been drained from many wetlands—every drop of profit that we can from the land. In many cases, this pragmatic definition of land usage remains synonymous in many Christians’ minds with redeeming it.

Of course, up to this point I have purposefully dwelt on neo-Calvinist rhetoric that echoes anthropocentric ideals. Perhaps because neo-Calvinism sounded as if it fit master-narrative ideals, it did not take root as a counter narrative for my dad or many other Reformed farmers to listen to. This is one reason that, as we stand at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is important for us be clear about our rhetoric—because, of course, neo-Calvinism contains very different ideals about creation and therefore of land management, ideals that have been somewhat neglected or, perhaps more to the point, simply not popularized in our rhetoric. Both Kuyper and Wolters are clearly creation-centric in their ideas, and this creation-centrism is one reason that Calvinism is uniquely positioned to engage the environmental debate in the twenty-first century. From the start, as Kuyper notes, Calvinism had a larger purview than many other traditions. Kuyper notes that, while “Luther’s starting-point was the special-soteriological principle of a justifying faith,” Calvin’s starting point extended “far wider...in the general cosmological principle of the sovereignty of God.”<sup>31</sup> Neo-Calvinism does not fall into the anthropocentric traps of some evangelical strands. Instead, as Kuyper says, it insists

that the object of redemption’s work is not limited to the salvation of individual sinners but extends itself to the redemption *of the world* and to the organic reunion of all things in heaven and on earth under Christ as their original head. Christ himself does not speak only of the regeneration of the earth but also of the regeneration of the cosmos (Matt. 19:28). In keeping with this regeneration, the final outcome of the future, foreshadowed in the Scriptures, is not the merely spiritual existence of saved souls but *the restoration of the entire cosmos*, when God will be all in all under the renewed heaven on the renewed earth.<sup>32</sup>

In Wolters, too, this creation centrism is clear. “All of this has been preparation,” Wolters tells us in his discussion of creation and the fall, “for making the basic point that the redemption achieved by Jesus Christ is *cosmic* in the sense that it restores the whole creation.”<sup>33</sup> Notice that Christ is the central agent in this restoration, similar to the original phrasing of “every square inch.” Wolters continues, “[T]his restoration affects the whole of creational life and not merely some limited area within it.”<sup>34</sup>

As we talk about nature in the twenty-first century, these passages contain two things that may be helpful to us: a fertile field—or perhaps vibrant ecosystem—of creation-centric rhetoric and an alternative to the view that the natural world is only a wilderness in the “throes of antinormativity and despair” that needs to be reclaimed by humans. A creation-centric vision of nature, it seems to me, needs to do more with considering natural landscapes as places where God’s spirit may have preceded us, akin to that landscape of Moses’ experience on the mountain of God, where the burning bush was God’s presence waiting for him.

In conclusion, how we speak or write about something can matter as much as what we say about it. Rhetoric can get steamrolled very easily into a larger narrative, as has often happened with the master narrative of Western culture. Even within Reformed circles, the creation-centrism that is found throughout much neo-Calvinist thought remains in the shadow of the anthropocentric master narrative that continues to emphasize production and efficiency in popular agriculture and continues to focus on saving souls in popular Evangelicalism. Especially as we witness the attempt to shift the popular narrative toward one that is oriented around “the planet,” we can expect a revival of the “values of the past” and therefore of the anthropocentric master narrative. Furthermore, we live in what Robert Sweetman, among others, has called a “post-ideological age,” where overt labels such as “neo-Calvinist creation centrism” are anything but palatable to a generation that claims to resist ideology.<sup>35</sup> For all these reasons, creation-centrism will not be an easy sell, which is all the more reason to pay attention to our rhetoric. If we are willing to rehear, reclaim, and perhaps repackage our rhetoric, the creation

centrism at the heart of Calvinism can help us walk the biblical path between the anthropocentric and ecocentric narratives that are in conflict as we begin the twenty-first century.

### Endnotes

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