
Pro Rege

Volume 25 | Number 1

Article 4

September 1996

Imaging God: God's Earth, Human Worlds, and the Challenge of Agriculture

Loren Wilkinson

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege



Part of the [Agriculture Commons](#), and the [Christianity Commons](#)

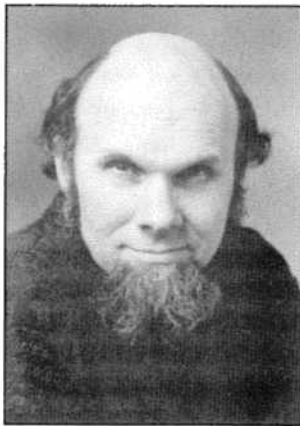
Recommended Citation

Wilkinson, Loren (1996) "Imaging God: God's Earth, Human Worlds, and the Challenge of Agriculture," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 25: No. 1, 29 - 38.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol25/iss1/4

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Imaging God: God's Earth, Human Worlds, and the Challenge of Agriculture



by Loren Wilkinson

What does our relationship to the Creator tell us about our relationship to creation? The question is crucial for all Christians, who ought to care about both kinds of relationship. But it is especially so for Christians whose vocation involves agriculture. For creation is not flourishing under present stewardship, a situation that doesn't seem to differ when Christians are involved. Deep down we know this is unacceptable, for the Gospel ought to be good news for all creatures, not only human beings.

The earth and its creatures are being affected by

Dr. Wilkinson is Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at Regent College, Vancouver, B.C.

human power over it. I want to begin by discussing the human *world* within which we exercise that power over the *earth*. I am using, as a kind of convenient shorthand, a distinction between the words "world" and "earth" which we make quite consistently, but hardly ever think about. "Earth" is creation: it is what God makes out of nothing. "World," on the other hand, is what we make, with human culture, imagination, and cleverness, out of God's earth. I will come back to that distinction later. Right now, I want to talk about the human *world* in which this conference on Christian faith and bio-ethics—that is an ethic having to do with life—takes place.

First of all, almost any bioethic or environmental ethic today is *an ethic in search of a religion*, in this sense. A wide range of problems and issues have resulted from Enlightenment thinking which said that religion was a mistake, that the proper way to be in the world is not in an attitude of worship, but one of analysis, leading to control. The vision behind this change was well-expressed when Francis Bacon, early in the 17th century, argued that we needed a new method of knowing that would restore our lost dominion. René Descartes, at about the same time, made a similar argument, for a method leading to infallible knowledge so that we might become, in his words, "masters and possessors of nature." The method has been spectacularly successful. Our analysis of "nature" has been increasingly subtle and far reaching. Our knowledge (which we call science) has given us great power (which we call technique, or technology).

But in the last few decades of this century, we have become aware that when we became religion-free investigators and manipulators of the physical world, we risked two problems which are becoming increasingly severe. The first and most obvious is that mastery of nature has proven much more elusive than we had at first thought. The complex negative consequences of such mastery (as in the side effects from an automobile, or an Aswan dam, or the "Green revolution") make that clear.

The second problem is less obvious, but for thoughtful people, more troubling. When we severed analysis and control from an attitude of worship, we started a process that would ultimately pull the plug on the very confident self-identity with which we had set out to "master" and "possess" nature. C.S. Lewis saw this very well half a century ago in one of his most profound books, *The Abolition of Man*. He wrote:

Each new power won by man is a power over man as well. . . . The final stage is come when Man, by eugenics, by prenatal conditioning, and by an education and propaganda based on a perfectly applied psychology, has obtained full control over himself. *Human* nature will be the last part of Nature to surrender to Man.¹

Lewis goes on to point out that when this happens, by the method of detached, impersonal knowledge which has supposedly produced our power, there will be nothing left by which to determine what we ought to do when we have such power over ourselves. "Stepping outside the *Tao* [Lewis uses the *Tao* to refer to the commonality of any religion-based ethic] they have stepped into the void. . . . Man's final conquest has proved to be the abolition of Man."²

This grim view of the end-product of the Enlightenment experiment is by no means simply a Christian concern. Perhaps the most thoroughgoing of reductionist approaches to human nature—and to ethics—in recent years has been sociobiology, pioneered by such figures as Richard Dawkins in England and (more fundamentally) by E.O. Wilson in the United States.

Sociobiologists are confident that an understanding of genetics and evolution can tell us where our ethics come from: they make us just a bit more fit to survive, and thus have been encod-

ed in our genes. And yet Wilson, at least, is honest enough to recognize the dilemma presented by such a conviction. As he puts it at the beginning of *On Human Nature*, if evolutionary biology is right (and he assumes that it is), and if it is, as he puts it, "genetic chance and environmental necessity, not God" who made the species, then the dilemma facing human beings is that (in his words again) "we have no particular place to go. The species lacks any goal external to its own biological nature."³

It is this uneasy awareness that the result of the modern experiment has left us no place to stand on and no place to go which has led, in the last decade or so, to that strange phenomenon called "post-modernity." One of the aspects of the postmodern world in which we all are living is that while not wanting to let go of all of the benefits our modern, supposedly value-free analysis has given us, we still are desperately in search of some place to stand, something to give us purpose, some religion, (or to use a more acceptable term) some spirituality in which to base our ethic.

This is why almost any bio- or environmental ethic today is an ethic in search of a religion. The *consequences* of our technology are suggesting that we need better guides for our action. But the *assumptions behind* that technology eliminate the possibility of any such guide. Having ousted values from the universe in the interests of gaining power, we are anxiously looking for some values by which to guide our power. Not surprisingly, therefore, the past couple of decades have seen many more courses in medical ethics in medical school, legal ethics in law school, and business ethics in business schools.

But we are Christians. For us, supposedly, this attrition of religion in the name of technique has not taken place. Unfortunately, however, the situation is pretty grim for Christians as well.

Confessionally, theologically, and creedally, we know who we are: Creatures made in the image of God. But while we affirm that Christian identity regularly, at the same time we are happy to accept the fruits of an Enlightenment project that has "bracketed out" that perspective and is based on a very different understanding of human nature. We are, in that perspective, simply a part of nature that can be studied and manipulated according to the new method. Is it likely, for example, that in the

human genome project (for all its enormous potential for human benefit) we will find an *Imago Dei* gene? Of course not. Most of the substance of our faith cannot be studied by the new method, so it is ignored in the developing modern world.

On the other hand, our creedal statements seem to have little relevance for down-to-earth environmental problems. They don't directly address the ozone layer, disappearing species, feedlot farming, or reproductive technologies. Christians and critics are likely to assume, therefore, that we have an "unearthly" faith. It is no surprise that Christianity often comes under considerable attack from many in the environmental movement, who say that it was the very idea that man is made in the image of God (and thus is unique in creation) that has led to the problems. Critics say that this idea of human uniqueness, coupled with a belief in human dominion, is as much to blame for environmental problems as René Descartes'—or Francis Bacon's—desire for mastery over nature. For the idea that we were made "in the image of God," and thus are rightfully lords of the earth, has, so the argument goes, led us to "lord it over" the rest of creation.

That is why in the searching for a religion in which to found the newly-awakened ethic for all of life, few environmentally-sensitive persons are likely at first to turn to Christianity. They are apt to turn instead to some form of Buddhism—which assumes that the self is a snare and a delusion anyway—or to neolithic and neo-pagan religions, North American or European, which assume, in a variety of ways, that all things are full of spirit, or all things are divine. All these proposed religious foundations for environmental ethics are, at base, monist: an affirmation that all is one. When we recognize that we are part of nature and that the whole dynamically evolving universe is divine (as Thomas Berry put it, "the only text without a context"), then we will learn proper reverence and care.

Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher who is often credited with being the founder of "Deep Ecology" (perhaps the most explicit attempt to recognize that environmental problems are really spiritual or religious problems), describes the ethical appeal of monism in this way:

Care flows naturally if the "self" is widened and deepened so that protection of free Nature is felt

and conceived as protection of ourselves. . . . Just as we need not morals to make us breathe... [so] if your "self" in the wide sense embraces another being, you need no moral exhortation to show care.... You care for yourself without feeling any moral pressure to do it—provided you have not succumbed to a neurosis of some kind, developing self-destructive tendencies, or hating yourself.⁵

Warwick Fox, the Australian environmental ethicist, in his book *Towards a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism*, comments on Naess's "deep ecology" ideas:

Having ousted values from the universe in the interests of gaining power, we now anxiously look for values by which to guide our power.

This has the highly interesting, even startling, consequence that ethics (conceived as being concerned with moral "oughts") is rendered superfluous! The reason for this is that if one has a wide, expansive or field-like sense of self then (assuming that one is not self-destructive) one will naturally (i.e. spontaneously) protect the natural (spontaneous) unfolding of the expansive self (the ecosphere, the cosmos) in all its aspects.⁶

As Fox makes clear by citing current literature, this is the emerging consensus of "environmental ethics": knowledge is virtue, in this case a knowledge that nature, the earth, the environment *is* ourselves. We are not *in* nature, we *are* nature: when we know that, we will act with environmental care.

Several aspects of Christian faith—such as the reality of God the creator, and the reality of our own sinfulness—keep us from such a response. The awareness that we are a part of nature is not the foundation for a Christian ethic, though it includes such an awareness. For the Christian, that foundation is found rather in the fact that we are human *creatures*, with a relationship of responsibility *for* other creatures, *to* the creator.

Many people perceive that when Christians say they are made "in God's image," such a declara-

tion affirms primarily our detachment, our aloofness, and our power over creation. And to a large extent, I think critics are right when they argue that a secularized form of this idea that human beings are “lords of creation” lies behind many current environmental problems.

However, an idea of “imaging God” that emphasizes kingly distance and power misses the very center of Christian truth. It is based on a profound mistake about the nature of the God whom we meet in Scripture, the God we worship through Christ, in the Spirit. But it is a mistake many Christians share.

I can illustrate this mistake no better than by drawing on Sietze Buning’s [Stanley Wiersma’s] wonderful collection of poems about life in this northwest Iowa farming community 50 years ago. In the poem “Calvinist Farming,” Wiersma says that when he was a boy good Calvinist farmers in this area “never followed the contours” like surrounding “Lutheran, Arminian, Catholic or secular” farmers because those others didn’t know how to farm on biblical principles. Wiersma goes on to cite the key biblical principle involved in that older (supposedly “Calvinist”) approach to farming. Clearly, that principle was a belief in God’s transcendence, aloofness, otherness:

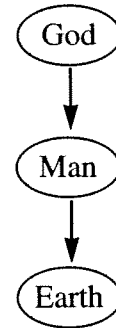
Calvinists knew the distance between God and people was/ even greater than the distance between people/ and corn kernels. If we were corn kernel’s in God’s corn/ planter, would we want him to plant us at random?

As a result:

*We youngsters pointed out that the tops of our rises were turning/ clay-brown, that bushels of black dirt washed into creeks/ and ditches every time it rained, and that in the non-Calvinist/ counties the tops of the rises were black.*⁷

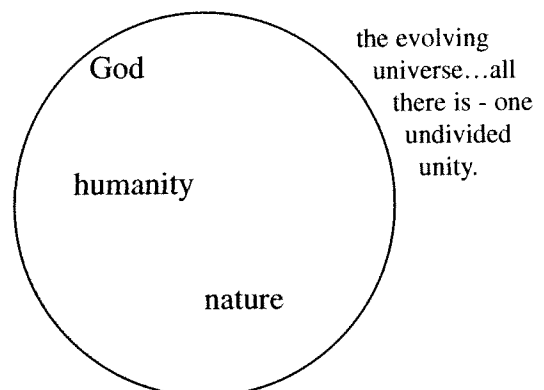
There is at work here an understanding of what it means to be in God’s image. That image is understood largely in terms of transcendence and distance: God is infinitely far above us; and a similar gulf exists between us and the earth—in this case, the fertile earth of this corner of Iowa. The result of an understanding of our image-bearing (in this little story) is an inability to look at things from the earth’s viewpoint (or the corn kernel’s viewpoint) but rather a determination to stand in a position of lofty distance, validated by our relationship to God.

Perhaps we could diagram the relationship in this way:



This kind of man-above-the-earth attitude has resulted in many current problems, not only obvious ones like soil erosion, but more subtle ones like the effect on animals and ourselves of treating them as little more than machines for the production of protein. And when, in our secular society, we eliminate God from the picture, what remains is simply Man over earth (or, as the ecofeminists put it, man over earth and woman, who is suspiciously like nature, “mother” nature).

This diagram is widely thought to represent the Christian picture of our relationship to God and earth, and it is widely criticized (I think for good reasons). But those who criticize it are likely to replace it with another understanding of God/humanity/nature relationships. This is the *monism* which Warwick Fox, Thomas Berry, and the deep ecologists generally espouse. They say that it is a dangerous and destructive illusion to imagine that either humans or God are different from the rest of nature: the whole thing is one great evolving unity, and the whole thing is divine. We could perhaps diagram such an understanding in this way:



Whether one looks at this picture from the standpoint of scientific reductionism (in which we and our thought are considered to be the end result of cosmic accident) or some kind of nature mysticism (in which the whole universe is evolving towards a higher purpose which will eventually emerge) does not matter. The ethical reality of this foundation for ethics is that it provides no foundation. In such a world there are many *is's*, but no room anywhere for an "*ought*." The divine cosmos is unfolding in its own way, and we ought to live in harmony with it. "What will be will be."

One of the ways in which this monist absence of "ought" has shown up (ironically) in the last few years is in a suspicion of the idea of "stewardship." The concept and the term is widely used in some environmentalist circles today. But the "deep ecology" environmentalists, including most ecofeminists, are quick to dismiss the term as a leftover from patriarchy. To claim that we can be "wise stewards," they say, is simply to reintroduce the old hierarchy of God over man over earth, albeit in a kinder and gentler form.

Sometimes—as in the "wise use" movement in many western states—this criticism of stewardship is justified. But the alternative to some sort of intelligent care of the earth is doing nothing at all. And no environmentalist will take that stance. Even the sociobiologist E.O. Wilson, whom I quoted above as saying that the human species has no place to go, and no reason to go there, has, in a more recent book on endangered species, argued passionately for human stewardship of rapidly vanishing life forms.⁸

All of this description of the human *world* behind the contemporary ethical dilemma on how to treat the *earth* brings me to the central point of my talk: What does it mean, what can it mean, to "Image God"? For Christian and non-Christian alike, bio-ethics is a problem because we don't know how to image God in creation.

Let me first sketch very quickly an answer that is closer to the heart of the Christian Gospel, then spell it out in a bit more detail.

-We have failed at imaging God in and to creation because we have often failed—especially in Western Christendom—to understand the very nature of God.

-Misunderstanding the nature of God—and

hence of his relationship to us—we have misunderstood our relationship to the earth.

-Misunderstanding our relationship to the earth, we have gotten ourselves into the problems which make conferences like this an urgent necessity.

-We have misunderstood the nature of God because we have not taken seriously what we regularly confess: that God is Love. That means that central to his very nature is communion, community, a fellowship, and a willingness to be involved in the life of another. And that divine fellowship of the Trinity is not a closed one: it is open to us, inviting us in—and through us, all creation.

*Our creedal statements
seem to have little relevance
for down-to-earth
environmental problems.*

Let me take a few moments to talk about this central affirmation of the Christian faith: that God is three persons, yet one God. At first it might seem to be about as far away from the practical concerns of bioethics as can be imagined. I would like to try to show you that it isn't; in fact, an understanding of what it means to affirm that God is a trinity is basic to understanding our own relationship to other creatures.

Christians have spoken about the trinity in two ways. By far the most common is to regard the trinity as primarily a matter of intra-divine relationships. In a mysterious and ineffable way, the One God is, in himself, three, but that is a mystery we cannot penetrate, except in a variety of inadequate metaphors. Sometimes this is spoken of as the "immanent trinity"—what God is to himself. This is not a false understanding, but it is inadequate.

There is, however, an even more ancient way of understanding the trinity. It is not inconsistent with the first way, but it is much more biblical, for it recognizes that the persons of the Godhead are open to us and for us. Christ is God for us, in the Incarnation and on the cross; the Spirit is God in and with us. There is, in a sense, no distance between God and us. In Christ and the Spirit we experience the central fact of God's nature: which

is inexhaustible, unreserved, self-giving love. Catherine LaCugna, in her study of the trinity called *God For Us*, puts it this way:

Indeed, Trinitarian theology is par excellence a theology of relationship: God to us, we to God, we to each other. The doctrine of the Trinity affirms that the “essence” of God is relational, other-ward, that God exists as diverse persons united in a communion of freedom, love and knowledge. . . .the focus of the doctrine of the Trinity is the communion between God and ourselves.⁹

There is a considerable renaissance of Trinitarian thinking going on today—drawing largely on Patristic and Eastern Orthodox sources. Jurgen Moltmann’s work *God in Creation* is an example of this recovery. Moltmann points out that a deep Trinitarian thinking is perhaps the only way to steer a course between the distant-God deism, which Protestantism often becomes, and the widespread monism or pantheism, to which many people are turning in search of a “bio” or “environmental” ethic. Moltmann writes the following:

The Trinitarian concept of creation binds together God’s transcendence and his immanence. The one-sided stress on God’s transcendence in relation to the world led to deism, as with Newton. The one-sided stress on God’s immanence in the world led to pantheism, as with Spinoza. The Trinitarian concept of creation integrates the elements of truth in monotheism and pantheism. *God, having created the world, also dwells in it, and conversely the world which he has created exists in him. This is a concept which can really only be thought and described in Trinitarian terms.*¹⁰ [emphasis added]

Or consider the very title of another important book, by an Eastern Orthodox thinker: John Zizioulas’s work, *Being as Communion*.¹¹ The source of all being is not an isolated divine consciousness: it is communion, fellowship, love.

Consider what such an understanding of the nature of God does to the two inadequate pictures of the God/humanity/earth relationship we sketched earlier.

It is not, on the one hand, that God “lords it” over Man, who “lords it” over earth, in lofty and detached transcendence, concerned with only his own glory. Nor is it that God, earth and humanity

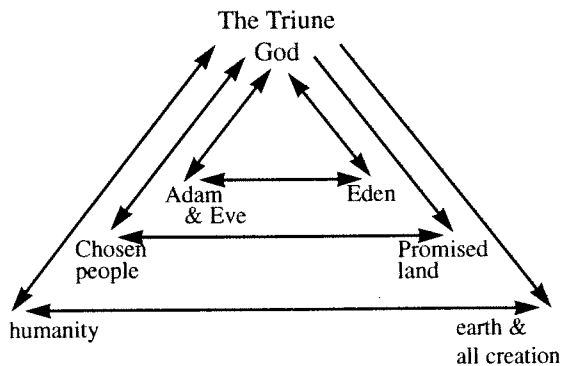
are all One, in some sort of gradually emerging complexity.

Instead, Scripture shows us a personal God, whose very nature is love. Father, Son, and Spirit live in loving relationship, and invite us into that relationship through Christ, in the Spirit. We are loved as individuals—yet it is in our relationships that our distinct selfhood is most deeply nourished. And creation is not left out of this community. We, and all creatures through us, are invited into the household of God.

Here again is Catherine LaCugna, on that divine household into which we are invited:

Household is an appropriate metaphor to describe the communion of persons where God and creature meet and unite and now exist together as one. The reign of God is the rule of love and communion. . . . The salvation of the earth and of human beings is the restoration of the praise of the true living God, and the restoration of communion among persons and all creatures living together in a common household. The articulation of this vision is the triumph of the doctrine of the Trinity.¹²

Perhaps we could diagram such a relationship in this way, which I take from the work of the Old Testament scholar Christopher Wright:¹³



Both earth and humanity are creatures, made for relationship with God. Indeed, as we trace the biblical story we see that it is very much a story with three main actors: God the Creator, Creation, and human beings. The Old Testament is very much concerned with God’s chosen people, with how they relate to the Creator—and how they relate to a place. First, the story is told in a very small form: the people are Adam and Eve; the place is Eden. Then, after their breaking of the relationship, the

picture widens. It is a whole people, the children of Israel—and a whole region, “the promised land.” But even this, the fullest biblical picture shows, is only a small form of the grand story, which is about God, humanity, and all creation. Restored relationship with God always involves a restored and healed relationship between people and people—and between people and land.

The Cambridge theologian Jeremy Begbie, writing about the arts, expresses eloquently this truth that creation is not left out of our restored relationship to the triune God, but that God’s very relational nature ought to shape what we do:

The God who calls us to cultivate the earth is not an impersonal Monad of absolute singularity, but the triune God who *is* love in his very heart. His very being is relational; he is ecstatic love, love that always goes out to the other. His relation to the creation is thus not to be described in terms of logical necessity (as in pantheism or monism) or naked omnipotence (the tendency of the Calvinist tradition), but in terms of personal commitment and faithfulness. This in turn will affect the way in which we perceive human culture. A responsible developing of the earth depends on refusing to see creation outside its relation to the divine love. Moreover, the Son has taken flesh and, as it were, offered creation back to the Father in his own humanity, and now through the Holy Spirit invites us to share in the task of bringing creation to praise and magnify the Father in and through him.¹⁴

It is, as Begbie makes clear here, a great mistake to think of God’s nature primarily in terms of power, omnipotence, control. (Perhaps Calvinists have sometimes misunderstood God’s “sovereignty” here.) God is love in his very nature. The universe is founded on the self-giving love of the Creator. As Jurgen Moltmann puts it, in *God in Creation*,

God “withdraws himself from himself to himself” in order to make creation possible. His creative activity outwards is preceded by this humble divine self-restriction. In this sense God’s self-humiliation does not begin merely with creation, inasmuch as God commits himself to this world: it begins beforehand, and is the presupposition that makes creation possible. God’s creative love is grounded in his humble, self-humiliating, love. This self-restricting love is the

beginning of that self-emptying of God which Philippians 2 sees as the divine mystery of the Messiah. Even in order to create heaven and earth, God emptied himself of his all-plenishing omnipotence, and as Creator took upon himself the form of a servant.¹⁵

We are used to thinking of God in terms of power: but in the love of God, the greater the power, the greater the pain. Creation is founded not on the power, but on the self-giving love of God. That is why the repeated refrain of the New Testament is that the very creation holds together in Christ. He is the lamb “slain before the foundation of the world.” Without him nothing would

*We are human creatures with
a relationship of
responsibility for other
creatures to the creator.*

have come into existence.

We have made our worlds out of God’s earth primarily assuming that we show God’s image most clearly when we exercise power. But what if we made our human worlds—of business, of agriculture, of forestry, all the rest—based on the premise that we most image God when we are in loving relationship with God, with each other, and with other creatures?

This premise raises enormous practical questions, of course. (What does it mean to be in “loving relationship” with a mosquito? A pig, a chicken, a cow, the soil?) We cannot forget that our primary identity comes from our relationship with God our creator. Those who seek to base their ethic towards life on the assumption that all creation is divine, conclude, naturally enough, that we should do nothing at all. No, we are made to act in, with, and for creation. But should our relationship with other creatures widen the great gap between them and us? No, I think God’s love to us suggests that the way we “image God” is to treat other creatures in such a way that their creaturely uniqueness is enhanced through our actions, so that (in Begbie’s words) we “share in the task of bringing creation to praise and magnify the Father in and through him.”

W.H. Vanstone, in a remarkable book called *Love’s Endeavour, Love’s Expense: The Response*

of *Being to the Love of God*, develops this idea in a variety of ways. He makes it plain that redemption is not an afterthought, but that the cross, in some sense, is planted in creation.

Redemption, indeed, is a part of creation—it is the task of “winning back” which is ever-present in the risk of creativity: and the Word of God by Whom the heavens were made, is that same Word of God who “suffered to redeem our loss.” We may say that Christ, the incarnate word, discloses to us, at the climax of His life, what word it was that God spoke when “He commanded and they were created.” It was no light or idle word, but the word of love, in which, for the sake of an other, all is expended, all jeopardised, and all surrendered. The Cross of Christ discloses to us the poignancy of the creation itself—the tragic possibility that, when all is given in love, all may be given in vain.¹⁶

Love is risky business, or it is not love. Even the love of God involves risk.

What might our imaging of the self-giving love of God look like? What would “Calvinist Farming” look like if we saw our imaging of God not in terms of God’s distance, dignity, power and omnipotence, but in terms of his self-giving love?

Jeremie Begbie, whom I quoted earlier, suggests, in his book on the arts, *Voicing Creation’s Praise*, that five things should characterize our action towards creation if we take seriously the triune nature of the God who is love. He speaks of *discovery, respect, development, redemption of disorder, and community*. I think they are a good place to begin as a foundation for bioethics as well. For both art and agriculture have to do with the way we image God in and for creation. Both should be a kind of care-full stewarding of creation. How might these principles translate into agriculture?

Discovery reflects the fact that there is always more to learn about God’s creatures. The charter for both science and art was given in Adam’s first task, which was to name the creatures. And true naming is not imposing a label. It begins with observation and discovery. Certainly there is room for all research and discovery about plant and animal life (including the knowledge that lies behind contemporary reproductive technology). But the way we use that knowledge must always be tempered by the next characteristic.

Respect: The principle of the mind of Christ, “to

look not on our own things, but on the things of others,” applies not only to our attitude towards each other, but to all creatures. There are ways of research, of use, of treatment of both soil, plants and animals, that show no respect for their own creatureliness. Respect certainly involves treating poultry and cattle as more than protein-producing machines. What that means in specifics must be worked out by individual farmers. But fellow creatures must be used with respect.

Development: We are called to participate with God, under God, in creation. This does not necessarily rule out even genetic engineering and modification, as it has not in the past ruled out selective breeding, fertilizing, drainage, and other forms of “development.” But we need to be very sure that our understanding of “development” does not stop at profit for us. It might be “development” to drain a marsh, to remove a wood—but not for the creatures who live in the wood and the marsh, not for the ecological health of a region, and not, in the long-run, even for the full well-being (spiritual and aesthetic) of the farmer. One of the things our “discovery” in creation is showing us is that what we thought was development is often, in the largest picture, degradation.

Redemption of Disorder: All is not well in creation. Much that is not well, in fact, is the result of false human ideas about what constitutes “development.” There is great need to heal and restore. A good place to begin might be in the way we treat the soil. Another might be to begin to rebuild the local ecosystems that have been so drastically altered and simplified through our farming—and to figure out ways in which our farming can work with, but not diminish, the full variety of God’s creation. Again, much depends here on a fuller kind of research, research based in respectful “discovery” of what God has done.

Community: God calls us into relationship with himself. Through Christ, in the Spirit, we have been called to participate in the community of the triune God. In a similar way we need to live in community with other creatures, lifting them into a human world of respect and love even in our use of them. In this sense (to take an idea from Eastern Orthodoxy) we are “priests” of creation, offering it back up to the Creator, enabling all creatures to participate through us in our thankfulness and

praise. Through our actions, creation can share in the love of God.

Putting these principles into practice is no easy task, for it may mean rethinking who we are and why we act—especially why we use other creatures in the ways we do. Let me conclude with two little stories that are not in themselves examples, but nevertheless suggest something of the God-imaging character that our actions toward other creatures ought to have.

The first example is the words that conclude a popular movie of a few years ago telling the story of Dian Fossey. Fossey spent most of her adult life studying the mountain gorilla and was eventually murdered, probably by poachers who resented the way her work interfered with their livelihood. Her funeral was just before Christmas. At it, the presiding Anglican priest spoke these words about her life:

Last week the world did honour to a long-ago event that changed its history—the coming of the Lord to earth. We see at our feet here a parable of that magnificent condescension—Dian Fossey, born to a home of comfort and privilege that she left by her own choice to live among a race faced with extinction. . . . She will lie now among those with whom she lived, and among whom she died. And if you think that the distance Christ had to come to take the likeness of man is not so great as that from man to gorilla, then you don't know man. Or gorillas. Or God.

A few years ago, in *Style and Class*, his last collection of poems drawn from his life in and love for this agricultural community, Stanley Wiersma—Seitze Buning—published a poem he had written at the dedication of an experimental farm connected with Dordt College. He described his father's well-meant, but nutritionally suspect, habit of giving a double portion of feed to all the animals every Sunday morning, and of his reasons for doing it.

Into the daily swill of skim milk and cornmeal/
Dad stirred an extra number-two canful/ of
Peet's Perfection Mineral Supplement/ on
Saturday nights for the pigs' Sunday breakfast./
It always foamed over the barrel by Sunday
morning./ and turned so crusty on top you had
to cut it with a spade./ It was like slopping the
pigs on Sunday with coffee cake./ Roy, Bob,
Frank, and Snoodles, our four horses,/ each got

an extra gallon of oats on Sunday morning./
every cow an extra half-gallon of shelled-corn
meal./ the chickens an extra gallon of shelled
corn on the ground./ What would Ames have
said of it if Ames had heard?. . . ./ Can Ames
ever comprehend Dad's explanations./ "We
look to God as animals look to us./ We're their
idea of God, their image of God./ God's love to
animals flows through us to them./ How will
they know God's love unless we show them?/
How can they tell the Lord's Day from another?/
How can we comfort the animals except by
food?/ They groan for eternal Sabbath with all
creation."¹⁷

*"...the tops of our rises
were turning clay-brown...
in the non-Calvinist
counties the tops of the
rises were black."*

There are undoubtedly better ways of putting the principle into practice. But the principle here is right: We image God to the rest of creation. Just as important: through us, creation joins in praise and thankfulness to the Creator. In that great pattern we need to build our worlds out of God's earth.

END NOTES

1. C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (London: Oxford University Press, 1943) 29.
2. Lewis, *Abolition*, 32.
3. E.O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978) 3.
4. From a talk given by Thomas Berry at the University of Toronto, July, 1994.
5. Arne Naess, "Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World," quoted in Warwick Fox, *Toward a TransPersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism* (Boston: Shambala, 1990) 217.
6. Warwick Fox, 217.
7. Seitze Buning [pseudonym of Stanley Wiersma], "Calvinist Farming" in *Purpaleantie and Other Permutations* (Orange City, IA: Middleburg Press, 1978) 61.
8. E.O. Wilson, *The Diversity of Life*. (New York: Norton, 1992).
9. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993) 243.
10. Moltmann, Jurgen. *God in Creation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1985) 98.
11. John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993).

12. LaCugna, *God For Us*, 411.
13. Christopher Wright, *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land and Property in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).
14. Jeremy Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark, 1991) 181.
15. Moltmann, 88.
16. W. H. Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense: The Response of Being to the Love of God* (London: Dalton, Longman, and Todd, 1977) 70.
17. Sietze Buning, "An Open Letter" in *Style and Class* (Orange City, Iowa: Middleburg Press, 1982) 55-59.