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*James Nash as Christian Deep Ecologist:
Forging a New Eco-theology for the Third Millennium*
by Bernard Daley Zaleha
University of California, Santa Cruz

This article is one of eight responses to James A. Nash's last published article,
The Bible vs. Biodiversity: The Case against Moral Argument from Scripture, published
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**James Nash as Christian Deep Ecologist:
Forging a New Eco-theology for the Third Millennium**

Bernard Daley Zaleha

Department of Sociology,
University of California, Santa Cruz,
College Eight Faculty Services, 1156 High Street,
Santa Cruz, CA 95064, USA
dzaleha@ucsc.edu

Abstract

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral, first explicated by Albert Outler, understands Christian doctrine as grounded in biblical Scripture, church tradition, personal experience, and reason, with Scripture as the primary guide but in dialogue with the other three. In his article, James Nash inverted the Quadrilateral to give primacy to reason and experience, with experience expanded to include all available empirical data, receiving inspiration from Scripture and tradition so long as they do not contradict the conclusions necessarily drawn from a rational reflection upon all experience, including empirical data as interpreted by science. From this inverted Quadrilateral, Nash concludes that the massive, anthropogenic losses to biodiversity 'matter morally, not primarily because these other species are instrumental values for human needs and wants, but rather because these species are goods for themselves—intrinsic values—that humans ought to respect'. In so concluding, Nash created a Christian Deep Ecology that respects the intrinsic value of all creation.

It was a quiet afternoon at a Boise office of the Idaho Division of Motor Vehicles. Indeed, no other customers were there, thereby making possible what happened. I had gone to re-register a donated car in the name of my non-profit law firm, the Wildlands Interstate Legal Defense Fund. When the clerk read my title application, she exclaimed in a snarling tone, 'What kind of organization is this?! Is this one of those organizations that drives farmers off their land because of some endangered rat?!' I absorbed this unanticipated verbal assault for a moment before

responding. Then, after saying that I was not sure where she got her information, that I questioned whether the scenario she described had ever happened anywhere, and assuring her that my organization had never done such a thing, in a fit of theological inspiration suitable for the deeply Christian sensibilities present in conservative Idaho, I continued:

Ma'am, I don't know about you, but I'm a Christian. And when I read in Jeremiah 12.4 that 'Animals and birds are dying because of the wickedness of our people, people who say, God doesn't see what we are doing', I draw three lessons from this Scripture. First, if animals and birds are dying, God doesn't think this is a good thing. Second, God knows who's doing it: wicked humans. And third, these wicked humans think, incorrectly, that God does not see what we are doing.

My spontaneous exegesis had its hoped-for effect. The clerk, in a now meek and quiet voice responded, 'I'm a Christian too', and we chatted a bit longer about a Christian's duty to God's creation.

The clerk's anti-environmentalist stance was neither then, nor as I write this in early 2009, unusual in Idaho. Indeed, at least some in Idaho consider anti-environmentalism to be a Christian's duty. A Baptist church in the Boise area, for example, produced and distributed this oversize bumpersticker: 'Forget "Save the Earth"; What about your soul? The earth is going to burn, What about you?', showing primary concern about a different sort of global warming. In my exchange with the clerk, I averred that anti-environmentalism is not a universally embraced Christian duty, and indeed, its exact opposite is declared by self-identifying Christians such as myself. In so doing, though, I engaged in proof-texting, a practice James Nash criticizes in his article, 'The Bible vs. Biodiversity: The Case against Moral Argument from Scripture'. I drew selectively a Bible verse into which I read my own environmental message, and offered it as proof of the biblical legitimacy of my own moral proposition. So, anyway, critics of such an interpretive practice would charge. The question, then, is whether proof-texting is always illegitimate. A second, relevant question is: Did Nash engage in proof-texting as well?

Before addressing these questions, however, I wish to praise Nash for his valuable vision for what a Christianity that truly values science and reason might look like. Because I share his urgent hope to see Christianity move in this direction, I am enormously grateful for this seminal article. Nash spotlights the limitations and errors that necessarily flow out of an excessive devotion to biblical/scriptural authority, thereby encouraging a broader quest for solid ground upon which to base Christian moral argument.

The Bible, including both its Hebrew and Christian components, is a collection of diverse literatures, written and compiled over a thousand years, whose contents can be divided into the malignant, the benign, and the sublime. As for its malignant streams, the Bible often justifies clearly immoral practices, such as slavery and stoning for sexual improprieties, as well as genocidal campaigns. While Nash does not state it quite this starkly, he makes essentially the same point when he states that the Bible ‘incorporates a variety of moral evils’ and

that some moral evils are sanctioned in the Bible, even allegedly endorsed by God, is the persistent problem [for Christian ethicists]. If God actually commanded at any time and place some of the standards and practices attributed to God by Scripture, then God would be the ultimate evildoer, unworthy of loyalty. Defending the moral credibility of God is reason enough to reject the moral authority of Scripture.

In so stating, Nash was staking out truly radical ground within the world of Christian thought, and in so doing he gave the Christian tradition a strong push in the direction it must go if it is to maintain any intellectual credibility going into the future.

Coming from the Wesleyan tradition of Methodism, Nash was necessarily steeped in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, a formulation of John Wesley’s thought articulated by twentieth-century Methodist theologian Albert C. Outler. Indeed, Nash expressly mentions the ‘Quadrilateral’ in a footnote. In this formulation, Outler argued that Wesley believed valid Christian doctrine would be grounded in four elements: Scripture, church tradition, reason, and personal experience, in that order of importance and authority.¹ Wesley’s addition of personal experience as having any legitimate role in doctrine was an innovation. It contrasted sharply with the Anglican tradition’s grounding of doctrine in the so-called three legged stool of Scripture, reason, and tradition, a formulation probably set forth first by Richard Hooker, a sixteenth-century Anglican theologian. In both formulations, however, Scripture remains as the primary element to which the other elements must conform. In rejecting the primacy of Scripture, Nash, in his final published article, revealed himself as a theological radical.

1. A church manual for the United Methodist Church states the following: ‘Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason’ (United Methodist Church 2004). Elsewhere in the UMC’s website is this: ‘[I]n theological reflection, the resources of tradition, experience, and reason are integral to our study of Scripture without displacing Scripture’s primacy for faith and practice’ (United Methodist Church 2004).

After persuasively setting forth why Christians must reject the Bible as the primary focus of their moral inquiries, Nash proposed a new model:

The alternative method for Christian ethical evaluation, justification (or not), and prescription that I encourage is *rational reflection on the fullness of human experience, in dialogue with the Bible and Christian tradition, on the one hand, and cultural wisdom, especially the relevant sciences and other religious, moral, and philosophical traditions, on the other* (emphasis original; underlined emphasis supplied).

Nash then elaborated this method further as follows:

Human experience is central to theological and ethical reflection. 'Experience' is a broad category to indicate the all-encompassing breadth of relevant data. It is far more than the personal-affective side of being or even religious experience, let alone specifically Christian experience. Instead, experience covers the totality of being: past and present, emotional and rational, existential and scientific, spiritual and moral, personal and social, psychological and sociological, technical and aesthetic, cultural and ecological, male and female, etc. Nothing is excluded as relevant data for theological and ethical reflection... Experience in the raw, however, doesn't tell us very much about moral truth and meaning. Experience needs to be analyzed, evaluated, and interpreted. At this point, reason becomes an imperative in the process as a 'guiding light of ethics'... *This comprehensive approach is thus a rejection of biblical and traditional exclusivism, which limits the subject matter of theology and ethics to past and privileged revelations, and ignores the continuing revelations of the ultimate in the totality of existence* (emphasis supplied).

For observers outside Christianity, this may seem a bland but reasonable methodology for Christians to engage in ethical reflection within their tradition. For many inside the faith, however, these are fighting words, nothing less than methodological heresy. In emphasizing the primacy of 'rational reflection' and 'experience' where 'nothing is excluded as relevant data', Nash is overturning even the experience-sympathetic Wesleyan Quadrilateral. For Nash, Christian Scripture and tradition should be conversation partners from whom insights may be drawn if, but only if, they pass the test of reason, empirical experience, and even contemporary affective experience. Heresy or not, Nash's approach could help bring Christian moral theorizing on the environment and on all matters relating to social justice into the new millennium. In a world in which one third of its inhabitants identify as Christian, this is a very welcome contribution.

In turning the Quadrilateral on its head, Nash appears to be drawing some of his experiential inspiration from deep ecology. After discussing the 'megaextinction' currently afflicting our 'planet's biodiversity', Nash

declared that these 'losses matter morally, not primarily because these other species are instrumental values for human needs and wants, but rather because these species are goods for themselves—intrinsic values—that humans ought to respect'. Several times Nash repeated this idea that non-human nature has intrinsic value. In so doing, he is echoing the central moral claim of deep ecology, a term coined by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in 1972. Deep ecology became the name of an influential branch of environmental philosophy that expresses 'the idea that nature has intrinsic value, namely, value apart from its usefulness to human beings, and that all life forms should be allowed to flourish and fulfill their evolutionary destinies' (Taylor and Zimmerman 2005: 456). Nash, in articulating what can reasonably be called Christian Deep Ecology, sought to overturn the long tradition within Christian thought of understanding humanity as possessed of a god-given dominion over the rest of creation. As the historian Clarence Glacken noted, particularly in regard to Ps. 8.6 ('You have given [humans] dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet') and Ps. 115.16 ('The heavens are the Lord's heavens, but the earth he has given to human beings'), the 'theme that [hu]man[ity], sinful though [t]he[y] be, occupies a position on earth comparable to that of God in the universe', ruling the earth 'as a personal possession, a realm of stewardship, has been one of the key ideas in the religious and philosophical thought of Western civilization regarding [humanity's] place in nature' (Glacken 1967: 155). In articulating a Christian Deep Ecology, Nash subverted this long, tragic tradition.

How much, though, of Scripture is Nash throwing out? He 'affirms that authentic moral norms can be found in the Bible, as a conclusion of critical reflection'. Having given so many examples of how Scripture fails this test of 'critical reflection', it would have been helpful if Nash had supplied some examples of passages that he thought passed the test of critical reflection and provided 'authentic moral norms'. He did say that he and some fellow travelers ground 'much of our theological vision and our foundational values and virtues' in the Bible's 'central affirmation that love is the ground and goal of being'. He then elaborated on this emphasis on love:

Love (always including justice as one dimension) is rooted in Scripture, but it is ethically justified only by rational-experiential criteria. We affirm the biblical witness to love, selecting it from counter-witnesses also in Scripture, because we have experienced love as the ultimate norm of our nature, the law of our being, the fulfillment of our moral aspirations, and the fount of flourishing as social and ecological beings... [It is the] key to the ecological reformation of Christian thought and practice.

His conclusion followed, that '[e]cological ethics rooted in the Christian tradition will be a logical extension of love to its horizons, embracing all life forms in accord with Christian experiences of and testimonies to the unbounded love of God'. Yet apart from a citation to Eph. 5.1-2 in support of the idea that 'love is the essence of the [divine] image', Nash provided no guidance as to where to find this central affirmation in the Bible.

He may have thought that this was so obvious it was unnecessary to belabor the point. After all, it was the sage of Nazareth, no fan of slavish devotion to either Hebrew Scripture or Jewish tradition, who surveyed the 613 commandments in the Torah and only found two worth calling up for special attention and retention: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might' (Deut. 6.5), and 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself' (Lev. 19.18; see Matt. 22.34-40). Christianity's founding prophet, in a well-known formulation, thereby boiled Christian ethics down to two propositions: love God and your neighbor. When Nash suggested that Christian environmental ethics involves an 'extension of love to its horizons, embracing all life forms', he urged us to dramatically expand who we understand our neighbor to be, deserving of love, a principle powerfully expressed in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.25-37).

Although I have affinity with the methodology Nash articulated for Christian ethical reflection, I wish he had given additional examples of Scripture that cohere with reason and experience. If he meant to imply that only Jesus' Great Commandment survives the new screen, then I would have to dissent. While I am prepared to admit that the list of sublime Scripture might be short, there are passages beyond those mentioned by Nash that pass his upended Quadrilateral.

While not exhaustive, here are a few examples. First, my interpretation of Jer. 12.4 as I presented it to the DMV clerk is a reasonable applied exegesis of that verse that would meet Nash's test. Next, if love God and love your neighbor is Christianity's ultimate Great Commandment, then Mic. 6.8 is Judaism's Great Commandment. What wanton transgression against our fellow human or the entirety of Creation could be justified in the light of its command 'to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God'?

An evocative moral lesson can also be found in the narrative about King David's murderous conspiracy to hide his adulterous affair. The King was chastised through the prophet Nathan's clever parable of the cruel rich man, who already having an extravagant plentitude for himself, cavalierly seized the poor family's pet sheep as a meal for the rich man's guest (2 Sam. 12.1-12). As the over-developed world continues to

plunder the resources of weaker nations, leading to environmental destruction that is precipitating the worst extinction spasm in 65 million years and the first anthropogenic one, this passage can pose the question: Are affluent, developed nations not like the cruel rich man in Nathan's parable? In a similar vein is the prophet Amos's condemnation of the exploitation of the weak by the powerful, and who envisioned an alternative future world in which justice would 'roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream' (Amos 5.24), a powerful biblical warrant invoked by many, including Martin Luther King in his famous 'I have a dream' speech.

Finally, there is the account of God's future judgment in the Gospel of Matthew, where the evangelist powerfully declared that faithful service to God has nothing to do with 'believing' in anything, but is instead found in action in service to the weak, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, and so on. The punchline was that any service to 'the least of these who are members of my family' is akin to direct service to Jesus himself, which in traditional Christian theology, is thus service to God (see Matt. 25.31-40). In this parable, it is not merely that God approves of merciful service to the weak and oppressed.² It is saying God is 'in' the weak, not the powerful. It is, therefore, only in service to the 'least of these' that God can be served at all, a lesson that has helped to fuel many social justice movements influenced by Christianity. The abolitionist, suffrage, civil rights, and anti-hunger movements are well-known examples. The emerging 'Creation care' movement is, quite arguably, a recent example.³

These passages are examples of Scripture that I love and that I affirm as valuable moral principles that can be used as guides into the future. I believe they pass the test of the Nashian Quadrilateral. In saying that I

2. As John Dominic Crossan said (Seminar lecture, Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, Portland, OR, 18 June 2002), just as Jesus taught about God through parable, the Gospel writers taught about Jesus through parable.

3. For example, Episcopal (and former Dominican) priest and eco-theologian Matthew Fox evokes this passage in Matthew when he opines as follows: 'Is Mother Earth herself not the ultimate [victim], the most neglected of the suffering, voiceless ones today? And along with her, the soil, forests, species, birds, and waters are not being heard where legislators gather, where judges preside, and where believers gather to worship. Is the human race involved in a matricide that is also ecocide, geocide, suicide and even deicide?... [Are we our] mother's keeper? This is the moral and spiritual question of our time. Evidence is slim that Westerners have taken that responsibility at all seriously... Patriarchal agendas and cultural presuppositions, patriarchal educational and religious institutions have left us all with maternal blood on our hands. The blood of Mother Earth crucified' (Fox 1988: 17, 33).

love these passages, I mean to show my affective alignment with those 'committed religionists who love their holy book', which Michael Northcott sees himself as defending in this forum (this volume). However, I do not love it all. I will unhesitatingly and unapologetically reject the malignant parts. As to the bad ideas and practices found and justified in the Bible, I do not think it is necessary or possible to explain them away, as do many theologians and other Christians. Like Nash, I am content to identify and reject these bad biblical ideas using Nash's revised Quadrilateral.

Nash's article focused on the limitations of Scripture in moral reflection and did not specifically discuss the implications of his revised Quadrilateral upon the perceived value of various parts of Christian tradition. An Episcopal priest friend of mine who shares many of Nash's concerns about Scripture solves the problem with a fierce clinging to the Christian creeds, such as the Nicene Creed, which is repeated weekly in his Sunday services. Upon my statement that I simply cannot believe the factual assertions of the Nicene Creed, his advice was 'repeat it until you believe it', which I took to be an admonition to employ self-hypnosis to overcome lack of evidence.⁴ In inverting the Quadrilateral, however, Nash also de-privileged tradition. Blind faith in the creeds or any part of Christian tradition would fare no better than blind faith in Scripture.

Other than opining that future Christian ethics, environmental and otherwise, will involve 'a logical extension of love to its horizons, embracing all life forms', Nash did not speculate on how significant the required changes to Christian thought will be once reason is fused with all relevant data. I think the positive changes that would flow from a faithful application of Nash's methodology would be enormous. Most importantly, Christianity would shed its supernaturalistic elements and move to a firmly naturalistic foundation, thereby joining the ranks of the emerging naturalistic spiritualities that are variously labeled as naturalistic pantheism, religious naturalism, or, in Bron Taylor's formulation, Gaian naturalism (Taylor 2009). Some work in the direction of a naturalistic Christian pantheism, which embraces the idea that new scientific

4. My clergyman friend had received this approach to how to deal with lack of evidence for the creeds' factual statements from an Antiochian Orthodox layperson in Utah named Ben Williams. Williams had recounted an experience where the famed Eastern Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann visited a Protestant seminary. In a question and answer session, a young seminarian had expressed his doubts to Schmemmann about the assertions of bodily resurrection, the virgin birth, and the factual assertions of the Nicene Creed generally. In response to such doubts, Williams recounted that Schmemmann thundered at the young seminarian, 'Who are you to question the creed?! Say it until you believe it!'.

understandings of the cosmos may totally overturn earlier understandings of the divine, has already been undertaken (Zaleha 2006). The Christian philosopher and theologian J. Edward Barrett articulates this stance as follows:

'God' is not the name of something outside and above reality (as with Barth), nor is it a super consciousness grounded in the whole of reality (as with Hartshorne). Instead, the word 'God' is a way of addressing—with awe, appreciation, and a posture of reverence—our everyday encounters with nature and one another... [P]antheism has two distinct advantages which qualify it for first place in the list of options available to those interested in a religious interpretation of life. [First, w]hen 'God' is understood as an 'attitude' word, a posture of reverence or respect we assume toward the world, a way of saying 'Thou' to the world, then we know our talk about God is about something real, the reality in which we 'live and move and have our being' [Acts 17.28]. In case you haven't noticed it, talking about something unquestionably real is an advantage few theologians throughout history have enjoyed. [Second, n]ot only is 'God' then undeniably real, but religion is then indisputably relevant. It has to do with our ordinary lives, their guts and their glory. And however much we may prefer another world, or weigh the possibilities of another one awaiting us after this one, the divine in this world is the one with which we have to do now. Pantheism makes religion relevant to our earthly life—so far as we know, the only life we have... Pantheism is what Whitehead called 'world loyalty' (Barrett 2002: 168-70).

In my view, the Nashian Quadrilateral gives new impetus to the proposed naturalistic turn in Christian metaphysics.

Nash may not have agreed with me here. In the second half of the last sentence of his essay, Nash affirmed that he was 'in accord with Christian experiences of and testimonies to the unbounded love of God'. Here, Nash seems to embrace a piece of traditional Christian supernaturalism, along with Whitehead, Hartshorne, Cobb, and the process theologians, of imagining a universal superconsciousness capable of knowing about and 'loving' us. I certainly appreciate the attractiveness of the idea of being held in the loving embrace of such superconsciousness. Unfortunately, '[a]ppealing as I find the idea of [this loving embrace], I must confess that it has a flaw: to wit, there is not a shred of evidence suggesting that it might be true' (Abbey 1982: 55).⁵ A Christianity faithful to data is no longer a religion about securing a place in an after-life, although this has clearly been the central hope and conviction throughout most of Christianity's history. The dominant stream of Christianity

5. Here, I borrow the environmental philosopher Edward Abbey's critical evaluation of the possibility of reincarnation, modifying it for this context.

embodied in John 3.16 ('For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life') is now to be filed with those other historically important ideas that seem incredible in the light of contemporary experience and science. The truth may set us free (John 8.32) but what it frees us from would presumably include ideas without an evidentiary basis.

While we may not be able to find evidence for a supernatural god who can love us and our world, we can, should, and must, love the earth and biosphere if we are to care for and flourish with them. This is ultimately what Nash meant when he argued that a faithful Christian ecological ethic 'will be a logical extension of love to its horizons'. The Abrahamic traditions in general, and Christianity in particular, have always been at their best when focused on expanding the circle of moral concern to include those formerly excluded, and at their worst when they operate in the opposite fashion. But quite arguably, expanding the circle of moral concern was the primary gift and religious genius of Jesus of Nazareth. What remains is for Christians and others to take that moral impulse yet further, extending that circle of concern to the whole of creation.

Old ideas die hard, if at all. It is by no means assured that Christianity will evolve in the direction that Nash envisions. However, if any shift to a more naturalistic Christianity emerges in the years ahead, it will be in part due to the pioneering work of a few great Christian thinkers, including James Nash. Nothing would be a more fitting memorial.

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