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Eschatological Motivations for Creation Care: A Thomistic Perspective on Environmentalism

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ABSTRACT

With the Protestant retrieval of Thomas Aquinas gaining popularity in the West, this article intends a textual analysis of Aquinas's commentaries on Romans Chapter 8 while conducting a comparative analysis of both Protestant and Catholic resources as they might support a Thomistic perspective on creation care. In Western conservative evangelicalism, environmentalism and ecological considerations tend to be kept at an arm's length, as the focus is typically on the salvific gospel, done so at the expense of properly redemptive creation care concerns. Such should not be the case, though, as the Bible clearly teaches that humans are to be good stewards over the created order (Gen. 2:15; Ps. 115:16; Jer. 29:5) with purview to the forthcoming eternal state (Mark 13:31; Rev. 21). While Catholics are quite well known for emphasising environmental concerns, it is encouraging that specific Protestant literature was also found to support ecological stewardship in the context of considering future creation-restorative events as expressed in the Holy Bible (2 Pet. 3:13). Moreover, after presenting the Thomistically inspired Restorative-Eschatological creation care position at length, the alternative views of Annihilationism and Synergistic Holism are compared, contrasted, and expressly found wanting.

Keywords: Biblical commentary, creation care, environmentalism, protestant retrievalism, Thomas Aquinas.



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INTRODUCTION

This writing intends a Thomistically inspired approach to creation care in relation to the biblical doctrine of the Last Days. Hence, environmental hazards, pollutants, and ecological negligence are accounted for in the context of God's mandate for humankind to be good stewards over creation (Gen. 2:15). And, Thomas Aquinas's commentaries are referenced in support of environmental stewardship, as well the teleology of his *Fifth Way*, indicative that God works all things together for the good of the global environment (cf. Rom. 8:28). In the meantime, though, all of natural creation groans and travails waiting for its glorified redemption (Matt. 19:28; Rom. 8:19-22). Moreover, beatification and benevolent postures are also considered with regard to the "already but not yet" contexts encompassing creation stewardship. Also, a draft of this paper was originally presented (remotely, online) by its committed Southern Baptist author at The New Heavens and a New Earth: Scientific and Theological Eschatology Conference at The Angelicum (i.e., The Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas, Rome/Holy See).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Protestant scholars, Jones and Spencer (2018), have done extensive research regarding creation care in the light of end-times theological considerations, and provide a robust response to the errant annihilation view of creation restoration. Catholic ethicist Hütter (2022) focuses predominantly on eschatology as related to ethics, although further implications are drawn from his work for ethical oversight over creation. Schaefer (2004, 2012) and Steck (2021) are explicit in their perspectives on creation's future eschatological destiny as a motivation for current and sustained stewardship. Artinian-Kaiser (2015) and Roszak (2021) take a similar stride, whereas Geisler (1990) and Dembski (2016) provide secondary support from the realm of evangelical Christian ethics and philosophy. Moreover, in the eclectic spirit, the *Laudato Si* of Pope Francis (2015) (of the Franciscan Order) is cited at length. And, while the (panentheistic) metaphysics of Chardin (1956) and Delio (2013) reside far outside of the Thomistic scope, they are briefly referenced to show the broader contemporary Catholic emphasis on environmentalism. In ontological contrast, Joseph Owens (1985) provides some key metaphysical foundations for creation care (regarding the *Fifth Way*) from the Thomist tradition, and Aquinas (1273) himself provides the central scholarly support,

predominantly via his verse commentaries on Romans Chapter 8.

METHODOLOGY

This study presents a textual analysis from the fields of theology, philosophy, ethics, biblical studies, and church history. Diverse literature sources are compared (seeking out synthesised alignment) from the academic lanes of Protestantism and Catholicism, as both ecclesial entities lay a heavy claim upon St. Thomas Aquinas. Moreover, since Aquinas never authored anything explicitly titled "Environmentalism and Eschatology," rational inferences are presented that logically exegete from his commentaries and are also resonant with modern and contemporary Thomistic literature. The intention is to stimulate applied theological considerations for environmental stewardship. The conclusions are emphatic in tone, as the author's conviction is that for Christians, environmental considerations should not be merely an afterthought, but believers are ethically bound to be good stewards over God's created order as a purview to the new heavens and earth that are to come.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Throughout the patristic and medieval periods, Christian theologians have considered the many diverse animate and inanimate entities that constitute the universe to be valuable and good. John Chrysostom (347-407 A.D.), Augustine of Hippo (354-430 A.D.), and Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274 A.D.) are among those who have deeply reflected on the goodness of God's creation. They considered the many diverse creatures as good in themselves, as good for human use, and as excellently good when they all function appropriately in relation to one another as God intends. Notwithstanding, what God created *ex nihilo* and declared as very good (Gen. 1:4; 10) has been severely tainted by the effects of pollutional sin (cf. Gen. 2:17; Rom. 5:12).

Wisely Protecting Creation's Face

The defacing of the natural world has been traced throughout human history, tragically affecting both the animate and inanimate realms via acute environmental degradation. The multiple pressures of resource overexploitation, the destruction and fragmentation of the world's ecosystems, the depletion of the ozone layer, and excessive waste dumping have created a situation where increasing numbers of the world's creatures, human and nonhuman, are struggling to meet basic

needs for clean water, sustainable foodstuffs, and habitats suitable for their flourishing (Geisler, 1990). Furthermore, diffused pollutant chemical wastes (such as unsafe levels of lead) are increasingly detectable in human bodies. And, animal extinction rates for many species far exceed their historical averages in the fossil record, revealing the connection between intensive human activity and such severe losses (Artinian-Kaiser, 2015).

People who profess faith in God should consider valuing each animal after its kind, and also the air, land, and water intrinsically (Gen. 1:1-26; 2:19-20). Animals of the world are in themselves valued entities that exist in time and space. Integral to discovering their important worth is to discern their interests and needs in surviving. Unnecessary human hindrances to wildlife's potential flourishing ought to be avoided in local and global arenas. Animal habitats should be protected in hopes of shortening the lists of threatened and endangered species, with fervent efforts made to curtail pollutants and persistent toxicants from the air, water, and land in order to demonstrate the faithful's valuation of the abiotic realm (Schaefer, 2012). Creation degradation is a form of environmental disorder (and is a corruptive evil), but there is a perspective from the Thomist tradition, says Owens (1985), "that to place things [back] in order pertains to the wise man." Therefore, humans have the (wise) potential to aid in the preservation of God's created order and should have an unction (i.e., fervour) to do so. This creation-preserving renewal theology is inspired by Christ, who will one day "make all things new" (cf. Rev. 21:5).

Preserving What Will be Made New

Advanced here is a restorative eschatological motivation for creation stewardship, as the world we now inhabit bears in effigy the new heaven and earth that are to come (Rev. 21). This is a covenantal communion approach to creation care acknowledging that God's eschatological plan to draw all creatures together in Christ is biblically supported (John 6:44; 12:32; Col. 1:20), and that humanity is a genuine participant in the divine economy (Steck, 2021). A stewardship role over creation should recognise that the universe is to be brought into a glorified union with God at a future time when, according to Maximus the Confessor (cf. Nesteruk, 2014), "the world . . . will die to its life of appearances and rise again renewed of its oldness in the resurrection

expected presently." This is similar to how humans will die and rise again at the consummation of all things (1 Cor. 15:53-55), as Aquinas (1273) accordingly states in his commentary on Romans 8:18, "For just as the human body will be clothed with the form of supernatural glory, so all visible creation in that glory of the children of God will itself obtain a new glory."

As Christians move forward by God's grace in sanctification (Phil. 2:12-13) along the path to glorification (Rom. 8:30), so should they be motivated to sanctify (i.e., preserve and protect) the created order in its current emblematic, pre-glorified state. While many ecotheologies provide a basis for expressing concern for the world, they should also regard the often forgotten inclusion of nature in theological reflection (Ps. 19:1-6; Rom. 1:20). In many North American evangelical churches, there is a tendency to ignore caring for nature, as it then becomes merely a setting for events in the history of salvation. Combating this error, restorative stewardship is not just about the moral alarms regarding the degradation of the planet, but the promotion of Christian pro-ecological behaviour as well. A more robust theology of nature needs to be (in Thomistic fashion) *extended* to not only include the relationship between humans and God, but also acknowledge the teleological goal of the entire creation, and to point to the theological reasons for such an approach; one that considers nature from the perspective of the place it holds in God's dispensational plan (Rosczak, 2021).

Integrated Communion with Nature

Unlike anti-supernaturalism, which attempts to shoehorn nature into preset material categories, the metaphysical picture painted here gives scientific inquiry free reign, allowing science to influence theology whenever appropriate. In brief, the metaphysical framework is that to exist as a composite (matter/form) entity (either animate or inanimate) in the ontologically pluralistic context of the universe is *to be in integrated communion* (Dembski, 2016). Here, referencing outside of the Thomist tradition for the moment, Ilia Delio (cf. Rosczak, 2021) has considered creation's relational holism more broadly in the perspective of the discovery of modern physics, such as the electron, whose characteristics are all affected by relationships. This holistic communion calls us to transcend the scientific modality; thus, correlating Teilhard de Chardin (cf. Rosczak, 2021) and his understanding of relationality as

a path to more being and more life, which are inscribed in creation and existent via ontological relation. What is more, Pope Francis (2015) states that his namesake, Saint Francis of Assisi, can help us all “to see that an integral ecology calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be human.” As Pope Francis (2015) in the *Laudato Si* continues, “The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change. The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents [i.e., relents] of having created us. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home.”

Eschatological Environmental Ethics

This restorative postulation is what evangelical scholars Jones and Spencer (2018) call “the most significant eschatological concept for environmental ethics,” averring that at the final judgment, creation will be purified and then renewed to a state of glorified goodness (2 Pet. 3:10-15). This renewal approach also contributes to a robustly biblical environmental ethics. Restoratively speaking, just as the second world is the first one washed clean by water, so the third world (heaven) will be the second one even more expunged of evil (purified by fire) so as to be fit for the kingdom of Christ. And, the creation’s need for purification is an action prompter for humans, one that reminds us that things are not the way that God originally created them and to point toward considering the future renewal of all things (cf. Rom 8:18-25). The Apostle Paul here states the following: “For we know that the whole creation groans and labours with birth pangs together until now” (Rom. 8:22).

Aquinas’s (1273) commentary emphasises a future hope in that “there is nothing after the present time except [glorious] eternity.” Hence, this eternal glory will surpass the sufferings of this time as the eternal surpasses the temporal. Creation is, in the meantime, partially formed now with grace, but it is still, as it were, without form and awaits the final form which comes through glory; therefore, “We also wait for this in virtue of the grace received into our nature, as we might say that matter waits for its form or colors wait for the completed picture (Aquinas, 1273).” On a note of transformative reflection, Aquinas (1273) then

references the Book of Wisdom (13:5): “From the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator.”

Teleological Considerations

In accordance with the *Fifth Way* of St. Thomas, God endows the created order with a natural form and powers that incline it to some natural end. Thus, “we might say that [as] a tree waits for its fruit to be produced . . . the visible [world] is ordained by God to an end which transcends its natural form (Aquinas, 1273).” But, for now, all of creation must wait (in groaning travalliance), and the need to wait is due to a defect to which the creature is subject to those bodily things which are changeable and inclined to fail; hence, they are called vain: “Vanity of vanities. All is vanity” (Eccl. 1:2). Nevertheless, according to Thomas (1273), the visible creature is subjected to vanity by the ordinance of God who subjected it in hope, i.e., in expectation of a glorious renewal. For further consideration, the latter point reflects the narrative of the four Gospels, where every action of Christ, particularly the miracles, is restorative in nature.

In other words, the culmination of Christ’s work in the world, through the cross, is *one of cosmic restoration*. Jesus himself stated that the things he did and taught were in accord with God’s will and designed to magnify God’s glory. The miracles were restorative as they took a fallen state and worked to make it right for the glory of God. The Christological reflections here are very deep; that is, creation was for Christ, is held together by Christ, and all things in heaven and earth will be made right and (unfallen angels, justified humans, and the created universe) will be finally and completely glorified through Christ (Col 1:14–20).

First Corinthians 15, which deals with the continuity of the present bodies of humans with their future resurrected bodies, also provides an excellent example of the restoration which is to come. The main point here is that there will be both individual salvation and cosmic restoration on the Day of the Lord. And, looking forward to a restoration of the whole of creation has significant “here and now” implications for environmental ethics. This author submits that restorative eschatology serves as an ecologically robust component in a theological system; it can influence an adherent’s actions and determine their views of mankind, bodies, souls, and

worldviews, and thus has potential for encouraging appropriate participation in environmental activism.

Contemplate Romans 8:28: “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” Again, Aquinas (1273) asserts, “we consider the recipients of this benefit and see something on God’s part and on man’s part;” and, this passage “indicates what is involved on man’s part when he [Paul] says: for those who love God. . . . For the love of God is in us through the indwelling spirit. But it is the Holy Spirit who directs us in the right path;” hence it says in 1 Peter (3:13) – “Who is there to harm you, if you are zealous for what is right?” In sum, Christian zeal for environmental stewardship is good, biblical, and right.

Creation Itself (Reflectively) Beatifies: It is clear that Scripture affirms that creation has instrumental value for human usage, but it also has inherent value as it points humans toward the enjoyment of God. As Wolters (2005) states in colloquial terms, “God does not make junk, and he does not junk what he has made.” Just as people are more likely to treat fine dinnerware with more care than disposable plastic cutlery, so Christians are more likely to pursue the holistic well-being of the environment if they see that it has permanent value pointing toward God’s greatness. And, providentially, the restoration view of eschatology encourages a moderation of extreme environmentalism because it anticipates God’s action in the restoration of all things.

The Problematic Annihilation View: On the converse, this perspective holds that the present world will be utterly destroyed and that a new creative act, which is parallel to the Genesis 1 creation *ex nihilo*, will occur to establish the new heavens and the new earth. The annihilation view of the fate of creation has negative implications for environmental ethics. Critics are right to note that an expectation of complete destruction and re-creation *ex nihilo* does tend to consign creation care to a second-order issue. An annihilation view of eschatology allows a preference toward personal redemption over efforts toward social goods. Hence, this view is categorically unbalanced at best. By conversely affirming the permanent goodness of creation, the restoration view more forcefully encourages participation in both personal evangelism and work for

the common good, including creation care (Jones & Spencer, 2018).

Regarding Synergistic Holism: A common failure of some forms of environmental ethics (e.g., emphasising synergistic holism in ecology) is the expectation of a re-pristination of the created order; that is, some activists may see the goal of environmental action as totally eliminating the impact of humans on the environment. Often, this extreme expectation results in misanthropy, sometimes including a tragically errant support for abortion (and euthanasia) as a means to reduce human impact on nature. In contrast, a restoration eschatology that anticipates the continuity of both human and nonhuman creation provides an impetus to pursue what Schaeffer (1971) calls “substantial healing,” which “conveys the idea of a healing that is not perfect, but nevertheless is real and evident.” In contraposition to synergistic holism, restorative environmentalism promotes the healing of both human and nonhuman life, as well as the preservation of inanimate entities.

A Posture of Benevolence: The restoration view of eschatology tends to encourage a more hopeful mindset that engenders the pursuit of social goods that go beyond creation care. The appropriate response to redeemed creation, enabled by the Holy Spirit, is that of love (Artinian-Kaiser, 2015). Love is the overall shape of Christian ethics, the form of the human participation in created order, and this love is ordered and shaped in accordance with the order that it discovers in its object. In suggesting that love is the responsive form of participation in created order, it is clear that love is oriented in some way toward action and that it is determined by the reality of an object. Indeed, inactive or idle love is illusory. As Christian love participates in environmental restoration, broader loving responses will take on a variety of shapes in the world, but will always be that which responds to “the order of things which is given in reality,” the order declared by the Creator as “good.”

This is where the intrinsic and instrumental principles are *awakened*, expressed by a dynamic of moral thinking that is both attentive to present realities and alert to possible responses to these realities. Moreover, there is the aspect of observant delight in creation: “God saw that everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). Even God, when witnessing the

goodness of creaturely life, would not refrain from delighting in its goodness. Such delight in creation may be defined as “affective attention to something simply for what it is and for the fact that it is;” it is not an act in itself, but a relationship between the one attending and the object attended to, a relationship in which there is a unity of love and knowledge (Aquinas, 1273).

As we are bound for Beatitude, there is a theological warrant for esteeming creation care as a virtue, not only in the here and now, but also with intention towards the beatific vision (Hütter, 2022). An eternal place where, according to Aquinas (1273), the “creature will be set free from its bondage to decay, i.e., changeableness: because in every change there is an element of decay,” and this will contribute “to the glorious liberty of the children of God, because just as they will be renewed, so will their dwelling place be renewed.” (“I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things will not be remembered,” i.e., the former changeableness of the creature – Is. 65:17).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: In closing, the preservation of humanity/creation and the future of integrated

development is in view, as Pope Francis (2015) attests in the *Laudato Si*: “Here I want to recognise, encourage and thank all those striving in countless ways to guarantee the protection of the home which we share. Particular appreciation is owed to those who tirelessly seek to resolve the tragic effects of environmental degradation on the lives of the world’s poorest. Young people demand change. They wonder how anyone can claim to be building a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded.”

Recommendations: Thus, the following recommendations naturally flow: Since Christ will be restoring the heavens and the earth to a perfect, glorified state in the Last Days, we should therefore be motivated to preserve and restore the created order to the best of our ability— this side of heaven. Moreover, in order for the world’s young people to take the church seriously in the generations to come, leaders should be notably concerned and intentional regarding creation stewardship. These are important considerations that the church would be wise to implement with regard to the (already, but not yet) postures of stewardship that we have over the created order. *Soli Deo Gloria!*

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