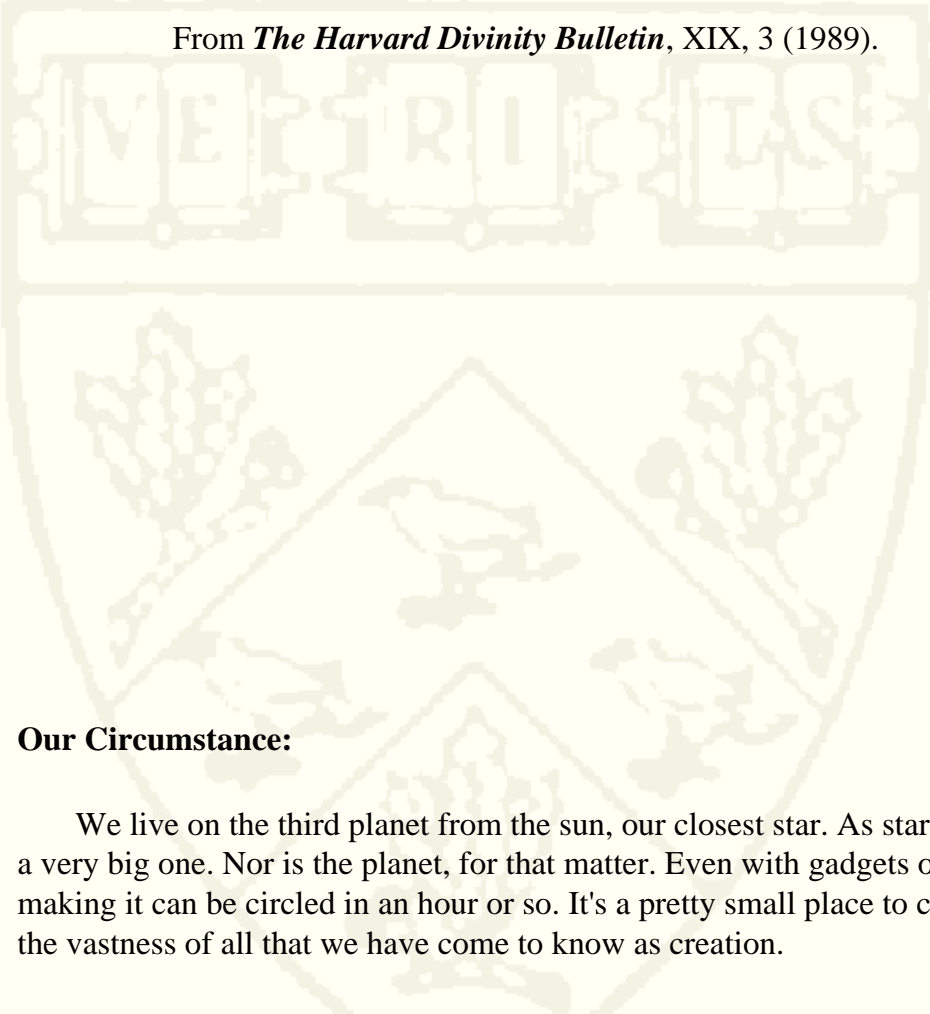


"While Angels Weep..." Doing Theology on a Small Planet

[Timothy C. Weiskel](#)

© Copyright, 1989, Timothy C. Weiskel

From *The Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, XIX, 3 (1989).



"...But man,
proud man,
Drest in a little brief
authority,
Most ignorant of what
he's most assur'd,
His glassy essence, like
an angry ape,
Plays such fantastic tricks
before high heaven,
As make the angels
weep...."

Shakespeare

Our Circumstance:

We live on the third planet from the sun, our closest star. As stars go, it is not a very big one. Nor is the planet, for that matter. Even with gadgets of our own making it can be circled in an hour or so. It's a pretty small place to call home in the vastness of all that we have come to know as creation.

Yet home it is; and an extremely vulnerable one at that. Most of the planet is covered with water, some of which periodically turns to ice in the high latitudes as solar radiation and the planet's orbital trajectory vary over time. Moreover, the planet is enclosed in an improbable envelope of gases whose precise proportions -- essential for our existence -- can only be maintained through the continuous metabolism of countless life-forms on or near its surface. Species, populations and communities of these life-forms co-evolve over time in response to the alternate rhythms of ice and warmth and the variation of habitat created by drifting continental plates, changing sea levels, and shifting regional climates.

Humans are a recent arrival in the community of life-forms, prospering during the inter-glacial periods only over the last million years of a three billion year continuum -- that is, in roughly the last 0.03% of life's unfolding drama. Moreover, it now seems probable that we will not endure any longer than many of the other transient life-forms that have left traces of their bones or behavior in the sands and sediments of time. The capacity for intelligence which humans possess may not

prove to be an adaptive trait in the long run, especially since human intelligence is frequently deployed to kill fellow humans or extinguish other life-supporting organisms crucial for long term human survival.

In biological terms humans provide no essential functions for the survival of other large communities of life-forms -- save, perhaps, for our own domesticated animals, plants and parasites. If we disappear it is probable that wheat, rice, cattle, camels and the common cold virus will not survive in their current forms for very long. But the vast majority of the earth's organisms can do perfectly well, indeed perhaps thrive even better, without us or our biological associates.

Our Beliefs:

None of this is news. Common sense and a junior high school education can impress this much upon our minds. Yet the curious fact is that we refuse to believe it. We continue to strut and prance about with a sense of supreme self-importance as if all creation were put in place for our benefit. As the zoologist David Ehrenfeld has observed, in spite of what science has revealed about our place in the universe "we still believe that the force of gravity exists in order to make it easier for us to sit down."

From where does such arrogance come? How can our beliefs be so far out of touch with our knowledge? How can we maintain such an inflated sense of personal, collective and species self-importance?

The answer, in part, is that Western religious traditions have generated and sustained this petty arrogance. A culture's religious beliefs are constructed from what that group has come to believe in religiously. Ever since the advent of cereal agriculture and with increasing intensity since the emergence of humanist thought stemming from the European Renaissance, Western cultures have come to believe religiously in their own power, importance and capacity to dominate and control nature.

Some religious groups have transcribed and elaborated creation myths which serve to ennoble and authorize this illusion of domination. In these myths a supreme and omnipotent God figure (usually portrayed as male) is said to have created humankind and enjoined this species to be "fruitful and multiply" and "subdue" the earth. Moreover, it is often a feature of these traditions that selected human groups come to feel entitled, empowered or specially ordained by such a God to be his "chosen people." Through their actions and history, it is believed, this God allegedly manifested his intent for the planet as a whole. In short, human groups created God in their own image and generated divine narratives that accorded themselves privileged status in the whole of creation.

If the monumental arrogance of such belief systems seems parochial and silly in our day, they are none-the-less understandable in the historical context in which they emerged. For well over 90% of human history, of course, the notion of humans conquering nature or subduing it was patently absurd. As a foraging

species, humankind could only survive by developing a complex understanding of mutual respect and reciprocity with a broad range of other life-forms. We know little of their religious beliefs, but among human communities prior to sedentary agriculture there is little evidence of belief in human dominance over nature.

With the advent of urban-organized cereal agriculture, however, the illusion of human control over nature appeared at least partially plausible and rapidly became widespread. Selective plant breeding, animal domestication and irrigation technology made it possible to capture large volumes of solar energy and accumulate multi-annual foodstuff surpluses. Simultaneously, the heightened ecological vulnerability of agro-ecosystems and the appearance of new forms of virulent disease caused sporadic crop blight and disease epidemics. These phenomena, in turn, made surplus foodstuff accumulation an absolute necessity for the continued survival of villages, towns, and cities. Access to arable land and a tractable labor force constituted the only assurance of continuous surplus, and the control of both these elements of production became the object of organized social activity.

Competition for land and labor often took the form of open conflict and warfare, leading to the development of idea systems that valued conquest and subordination and inscribed these metaphors in the underlying structure of belief in agricultural communities. Hierarchy, power, control and domination were all real-life experiences for agricultural peoples, locked in the struggle to control land and labor. It is, thus, hardly surprising that these metaphors came to characterize the beliefs that these communities held to religiously in an attempt to understand their world and conceptualize their position within it.

The illusion of control over nature received further emphatic support in recent Western history from the experience of European overseas expansion since the Renaissance. In the brief period of a few centuries, European peoples expanded upon vast and thinly peopled regions of the world, carrying with them their crops, animals, weeds, pests and diseases. These associated "biological allies" devastated native flora, fauna and human populations in large portions of the world, and western Europeans succeeded in establishing "neo-Europes" in regions of North and South America, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. As "white-settler" societies these groups often perceived themselves as "frontier societies," for it was along the frontiers of interaction with native species that these cultures experienced their self-defining moments of successful domination.

Perhaps even more important, the history of this expansion has led Western cultures and the westernized elites in Third World countries to believe in the illusion of unlimited growth. The industrial revolution and discovery of fossil energy sources further sustained the belief in infinite growth. Having expanded upon the things of nature, modern mankind has come to believe that expansion is in the nature of things. This is not so, of course, but we are only now just beginning to discover that this cherished belief is a potentially fatal illusion.

Our Task:

We need to change our habits of mind and action in the very near future. Furthermore, this promises to be a struggle. Abandoning the belief in growth will be difficult enough in the Western world, but it is likely to be even more difficult in the Third World because the dream of an expanding economy seems to be all that political leaders currently have to hold out as hopeful for the burgeoning populations of these regions. Any serious effort to question the economics of perpetual growth raises the ugly and disconcerting question of resource distribution and consumption. Political leaders are reluctant to address this embarrassing issue and prefer to stoke the fires of expanding Third World economic growth instead of the more difficult but necessary task of designing durable systems of steady-state economics.

Mounting evidence concerning the role of humans in natural ecosystems indicates that the world ecosystem cannot long endure a wide-scale replication of the resource-depleting patterns of recent Western growth. Indeed, the science of ecology is suggesting that many other of our religiously held beliefs -- like the belief in perpetual economic growth -- are in fact colossal illusions. We cannot meaningfully subdue nature for very long. There are no permanent frontiers in an ecosystem. Unrestrained growth on a small planet is simply not possible. Human domination of nature is an oxymoron, for our "control" of nature can only be achieved by understanding its laws and subordinating ourselves to them.

Most of our received theological formulations are pitifully out of touch with this current ecological understanding. In fact many religious leaders, like many politicians, actively resist the insights of ecology, for these ideas entail a fundamental reformulation of both liberal public policy and humanist belief in our contemporary world. Clearly there is much work for theologians to undertake in re-examining the received tradition.

Yet even more than this will be needed because science itself has become the cornerstone of modern mankind's religiously held belief in human control. In our era, this kind of arrogant science, like the self-important religious traditions of the past, must be questioned by a new, ecumenical theology of creation and a realistic understanding of human agency. If we are going to survive as a species, we need now to develop a radical sense of humility and subordination to a re-sanctified and holy nature. Nevertheless, because modern science and technology often engender and sustain the powerful illusion of control, we are in danger -- as Shakespeare observed -- of being most ignorant of what we are most assured.

Political leaders are equally guilty of the arrogant illusions that have characterized religious traditions and scientific endeavors alike. "Drest in a little brief authority" elected politicians have come to think that they are in charge of the world. In the public policy they formulate they play fantastic tricks with the world's resources for the reputed benefit of groups that elected them. But what of those who cannot vote for parliamentarians? What of future human generations? What about other species? It is no wonder that angels weep.

The time has come for contemporary theologians to re-state some simple

truths: we did not create the world; we cannot control it. Instead, we must learn in full humility to live with all other creatures within its limits. As it was once made clear to Job, it is not by our wisdom that the hawk soars and spreads his wings toward the south. Indeed, we are only beginning to discover the precious intricacy and fragility of the life webs laid down billions of years before we appeared. Realization of these simple truths could lead to a fundamental reformulation of public policy and our collective beliefs, both of which will be required for our survival as a species. Scientists, politicians and religious communities alike sorely need what theologians must now provide -- a positive vocabulary of human limit in a sanctified and sustainable creation. In short, we all stand in need of a theology for a small planet.

* * * * *

Return to [Occasional Papers Series Directory](#)
Return to [Environmental Ethics & Public Policy Page](#)
Send comments via E-Mail to [Tim Weiskel](#)

