

Are We Killing God's Earth? Ecology and Theology,
Proceedings of the eleventh symposium of the Institute for Theological Research (UNISA)
Held at the University of South Africa in Pretoria on 2 and 3 September 1987.
W.S. Vorste, editor. Published by the University of South Africa, Pretoria, Hardcover, 118 pp.

Patron Saint of Ecology

It seems that movements cannot do without saints; the conservationist movement is no exception. Lynn White, professor of history at the University of California, the man who leveled the charge that the Christian faith has to bear much of the blame for the ecological crisis, which now threatens our world, proposed Francis of Assisi as the "patron saint of ecologists. "

Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) has been called "the greatest radical in Christian history since Christ." He approached all living things with utter humility. It is said that he treated all living things and even inanimate objects as if they were his brothers and sisters; and that his loving and contemplative reverence for nature survives today in the conservationist movement. Hence it should not surprise our readers that the World Wildlife Fund celebrated its 25th anniversary on September 29, 1986, with an interfaith ceremony in the Franciscan Basilica, Assisi, Italy.

During the ceremony leaders from the Buddhist, Christian, Jewish and Muslim religions made formal declarations of the relationship between man and nature. R.F. Fuggle, Professor of Environmental Studies, University of Cape Town, suggests that these "Declarations of Assisi" should be carefully studied by anyone in any way concerned with the relationship between man and the environment. They also form the context and setting of the symposium of the Institute for Theological Research. But why this particular context for a Christian dialogue on ecology? Is the world to set (once again) the agenda for the church? Francis of Assisi would have found himself most uncomfortable in an interfaith setting. He was neither a sentimental nature lover nor a hippy "drop-out" from society. The environmentalists totally neglect the sternness of his character, his all pervasive love of and devotion to the Triune God, and his intense desire to identify totally with the suffering of Christ. These facts alone make sense of his life. Francis would have been shocked if he had been invited to worship with Muslims. His heart's desire was to win them for Christ.

Why should theologians be concerned about ecology? Traditionally theology was a serious reflection upon Scripture, transmitting its teaching to the church. Not so today. Vorster says that theology has become contemporary attempts to create systems of meaning which enable modern man to relate his day to day experience of life in a meaningful manner to God, man and the world. If this is so, theology has become ethics.

Though I have serious reservations about the theology of some of the contributors, the book is still worth reading. It is one of the few serious and scholarly attempts to come to

grips with a crucial crisis, which faces all of us. For example, J.A. Loader offers the Old Testament Perspective on the ecological crisis; and N.Boegman & C.J. Els discuss the question "*Air Pollution: Is it serious?*". None of the authors pretend to have all the answers. They hope that the reader will form his own informed theological opinion on the question, "*Are we killing God's earth?*" Since the symposium was held in South Africa neither the statistics nor all the illustrations are relevant for the North American readers. Since the environment is now a global concern, this book is still a good resource for those interested in an intelligent discussion on global warming rather than listening to all the hype of the latest environmentalist guru's opinions.

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September, 1987