Scholarly Protestant theology in the nineteenth century became primarily anthropology; that is, it focused on the human condition as understood in the Christian tradition. This resulted from the general lack of confidence in theoretical reflection about God, caused in part by the breakdown of the earlier deism and in part by the rejection of metaphysics in the extremely influential philosophy of Immanuel Kant. This move entailed the virtual disappearance of the natural world from consideration. Where it did appear, as in Albrecht Ritschl, it represented the sphere over which human beings were to exercise their mastery.

Popular Protestant piety and its conservative theological expressions did not go so far in this anthropocentric direction. The deistic argument from the order and beauty of the world to God as supreme personal will still played a large role. This piety, however, received a major shock from evolutionary theory. By the twentieth century, in the British and American spheres, the controversy over evolution split the church between those who appealed to the Bible in a literalistic way as trumping science, and those who adjusted their theology, more or less, to scientific thinking. Most of the latter solved the problem in Kantian fashion, by sharply distinguishing the world of science from the historical world to which theology applied.

Another response played some role in the English-speaking world. One might try to develop a larger vision in which the data of biological evolution along with other sciences and the historical understanding of human beings were brought into coherent unity. This required challenging the mechanistic worldview underlying almost all
scientific formulations of the time. It required the rejection of supernaturalist theism and appeals to revelation that presupposed this. It took evolution seriously, but understood it to mean that some of the characteristics of the human sphere must have been present also in prehuman creatures.

I attended the Divinity School at the University of Chicago, which was one of the few centers of this kind of thinking in the mid twentieth century. To avoid complete isolation from the dominant discussion, we emphasized the anthropological implications of our vision. Existentialism was the most challenging form of this anthropology, and the one most congenial to us. Hence, we were likely to accent this aspect of our tradition of “neo-naturalism.”

The piety I brought with me to the University of Chicago was shattered by my first year of study in the Humanities Division in a program called the Analysis of Ideas and the Study of Method. I entered that program precisely to expose my Christian faith to the acids of modernity. I shifted to the Divinity School because I realized that the faculty there had come to terms with those acids without abandoning their faith. I needed to understand how. I had glimpsed this possibility in a course I had taken with Charles Hartshorne in the Philosophy Department, and I wanted to learn more about it. Hartshorne had introduced me to the thought of Alfred North Whitehead, and it was to this that I was most drawn.

Most of Whitehead’s work was about the natural world. That was important to me chiefly as assuring me that what he said about humanity and God was coherent with a responsible science. The Protestant theology that shaped my questions did not direct my concerns to nature as such. In 1965 I published a book entitled “A Christian Natural
Theology” in which I wrote about God and human beings based on Whitehead’s philosophy and said almost nothing about the rest of the natural world.

It was in the summer of 1969 that my conversion occurred. One of my sons, Cliff, urged me to read The Population Bomb by Paul Ehrlich. It was at the time a best seller, and it was one of the major influences on Earth Day 1970. Ehrlich was wrong on many particulars, but I was convinced then, and am convinced now, that he was right in his fundamental vision. Population growth combined with rising rates of per capita consumption is on a collision course with the Earth’s capacity to sustain us.

Abruptly, the separation I had been making between human history and the changing condition of the planet became impossible. The fate of the natural world became a consuming concern. I re-thought my vocation. I laid aside a manuscript I had almost completed on explanation in history and wrote Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology. I led in organizing a 1970 conference on “The Theology of Survival.” And I spoke here and there in all too alarmist ways.

My new vocation was to critique the Protestant theology that had led me, and so many others, to be blind to the dependence of human life on the wider ecological system. We Protestants had much responsibility for the blindness of our whole society. We were called to repent.

I was certainly not the first to recognize the error of the dominant tradition. I realized that some of my own teachers, including Hartshorne, had been deeply concerned and had worked for change. Joseph Sittler had made an important speech at the Delhi meeting of the World Council of Churches calling for a renewal of concern for the whole of creation. Most helpful to me, Lynne White, Jr., a Presbyterian layman who taught the
history of technology at UCLA, had presented a speech on “The Historical Roots of the Ecological Crisis” in which he had explained how the anthropocentric reading of the Bible in the West had provided the underpinning for the Western ideal of dominating nature. My work depended on all of these.

My work depended, even more, on the thought of Whitehead. Suddenly whole dimensions of its implications became important to me. For Whitehead, human existence is continuous with all other forms of existence. Every momentary event is an occasion of experience, and every occasion of experience is of value to itself as well as to others. Among the others, the Consequent Nature of God, to which all else contributes its value, is supremely important. The idea that only human experience is of value is totally erroneous.

Furthermore, I was convinced that on these points Whitehead was closer to the Bible than the anthropocentric theology that dominated the Western tradition and had been intensified for Protestants by Kant. Quite apart from the relation to human beings, the creation story asserts that God saw that the creation was good. The Jewish scriptures celebrate the land and understand nature to glorify God. Jesus speaks of God’s providential care for plants and birds. Even Paul envisions the day when the whole creation is freed of suffering. The narrowing of focus on God and the human soul, so pronounced in Protestantism, is a distortion of the Bible.

It has been a source of joy to find that fairly rapidly other Protestants have moved in the same direction. Already in 1975 at Nairobi the World Council of Churches added to its vision of a just and participatory society the idea that it must be sustainable as well. Although this is still anthropocentric thinking, it opened the door to seven years of
worldwide reflection on the importance of the natural world. At Vancouver in 1982, the Council shifted to the phrase “the integrity of creation,” a much less anthropocentric term. Similar changes took place in many denominational statements. The Protestant churches took the Bible seriously and began the long and difficult task of repentance.

Repentance is not easy. Deeply entrenched habits of thought and sensibility continue to dominate even after one has recognized the need for change. This is certainly true of large institutions. It is also true for individuals like me. I published in 1975 my most important theological book, Christ in a Pluralistic Age. It sets the issue of Christian belief in Jesus Christ in the context of religious and cultural pluralism. The larger natural context is virtually absent. I am glad to say that after a long period in which I found it necessary to segregate by work in interreligious dialogue from my concern for the fate of the Earth the two have now merged. My dialogue partners deeply share this passion.

Despite my failure to integrate my concerns in the seventies, I was not inactive on the issue of what we humans are doing to the rest of the world and the church’s responsibility. Shortly after the conference on “The Theology of Survival” I became convinced that there was little likelihood of change unless there were some positive images of what we should change to. Some students worked with me to find thinkers who took the crisis seriously and then went on to propose ways of ordering our lives that could be both sustainable and rewarding. In 1972 we held another conference on “Alternatives to Catastrophe.” The quest for an alternative to the continuing course of events has been central to my quest to this day.

Of all the denominations, it was the American Baptists who took the need for change most seriously. This was due chiefly to the leadership of one man, Jitsuo
Morikawa. He had been my pastor during my student days at Chicago, and we reconnected. I had the privilege of working with him on several conferences in the seventies.

The man who played the largest role in bringing the urgency of sustainability before the Nairobi WCC Assembly was an Australian ecologist, Charles Birch. Birch had been influenced by Whitehead and admired Charles Hartshorne. These shared interests had brought us together in the sixties. In 1976 he suggested that we write a book jointly. This took some time, but in 1981 we published *The Liberation of Life*. It employed a Christian ecological perspective to deal with life at several levels and to draw forth the implications of this vision for public issues.

The greatest challenge I felt to my Christian approach was from a colleague in the Claremont Colleges, Paul Shepard. I first worked with him on conference in the mid-seventies on “The Rights of Nature.” The conference heightened my awareness of the danger of “rights” language, although it did not persuade me to abandon it. Talking with Shepard then and subsequently, I felt the superficiality of much of my own work. I also recognized how deep was my assumption that civilization was something positive, despite all its problems. I had celebrated the Christian contribution to civilization and to the development of science and technology, despite their ambiguous role.

Paul’s view was that the abandonment of the hunting and gathering society had been a disaster and that all supposed “progress” since then had driven humanity further into madness. Much that I had taken as supportive of the positive role of Israel and Christianity (as well as the other “higher” religions) was presented by him as reason to reject them and attempt to recover the basic ethos and sensibility of primal religions. For
Paul, the self-transcendence that enables us to be self-critical and to repent is itself a mark of our deep alienation. Several times we taught seminars jointly, and I was often overwhelmed by the depth and richness of his scholarship and the creative originality of his vision. Nevertheless, I have remained convinced that whatever the values that might have been retained had our ancestors never turned to agriculture and herding, today our hope lies in the capacity to repent, that is, to intentionally change the direction of thought and action, which, Paul agreed, the prophetic tradition of the Hebrews most effectively introduced into history. I pointed out to Paul that he was playing the prophetic role, much as he opposed it.

By the early eighties I had become convinced that the church’s repentance, however important, would not change the course of events. The world was run on economic principles, not Christian ones. If there were to be any possibility of redirection, these principles would have to be challenged. I began to offer occasional courses on theology and economics in order to educate myself. I became convinced that one major problem was that economic well being was typically gauged by Gross National Product, whereas I was convinced that increases in GNP had little or no connection to actual human betterment. A group of students worked with me to study existing alternatives to the GNP, better correlated to actual economic gains. None were quite satisfactory, and none were being kept up. Accordingly, we went on to construct our own tables for the United States. The latter task was finally carried out by my son, Cliff. We called our measure the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare. It has been developed subsequently by Redefining Progress into the Genuine Progress Index. Similar statistics have now been compiled for eight other countries. Quite consistently it turns out that at the present
time growth as measured by GNP (or GDP) does not indicate any real improvement in the economic well being of the people.

Of course, there is much more to economics. I turned to Herman Daly, who had presented his vision of a stationary state economy at our conference on “Alternatives to Catastrophe,” suggesting that we write a book together. We undertook to critique the theoretical assumptions of modern economic thinking, to propose alternative assumptions, and to indicate the practical implications that would follow from these. In 1989 we published *For the Common Good*, which has touched the economic community only at the fringes but has exercised some influence in a wider circle of those interested in public affairs. Working on this book confirmed for me a thesis Birch and I put forward in our earlier book, that the policies that destroy nature are also destructive of human beings, especially the weak and poor.

This work has given me lenses with which to observe the still growing dominance of economics in national and world affairs. I have lectured and written on current events and collected some of these essays in *Sustaining the Common Good*. I have grown increasingly distressed about the dominance of the market in education.

I have written a book locating the development of theory and practice in the World Bank in the context of a theological periodization of history, moving from the age of Christianism through nationalism to the current age of economism. I note the emergence of a new vision and commitment that I call Earthism and see how this is challenging the dominance of economism in the Bank, partly from within, but mostly from without. The book is entitled *The Earthist Challenge to Economism: A Theological Critique of the World Bank*. 
It is very hard to remain hopeful, but hope is a theological virtue not to be abandoned because of discouraging circumstances. The corporate domination of the world for purposes of rapid exploitation of both the poor and natural resources is accelerating. It is supported by both of the major political parties, by the universities, by the media, and therefore by the public. Yet resistance is rising. Labor and environmentalists are putting aside their differences to recognize the commonality of their interests. Repentance is advancing in the churches and other religious communities are joining in. It is too late, much too late, to prevent many of the catastrophes that were still preventable when I wrote *Is It Too Late?* in the summer of 1970. But there is much of value that could still be saved if we change direction now. Sadly, there is less every year. We cannot afford to relax our efforts.

**John B. Cobb, Jr., Claremont School of Theology, Emeritus**

**Further Reading**


