Dualisms, Dualities, and Creation Care

Already in 1970, when modern discussions of environmental ethics were still new, Francis Schaeffer warned that dualism within the Christian community and tradition was one of the main reasons why Christians sometimes have difficulty articulating and practicing proper environmental ethics. Schaeffer often used the term “Platonic” to describe this dualism. In his groundbreaking book, Pollution and the Death of Man (1970), after explaining how neither pantheism nor humanism has an answer for the question of how to understand nature and the human-to-nature relationship, he wrote,

“It is well to stress, then, that Christianity does not automatically have an answer; it has to be the right kind of Christianity. Any Christianity that rests upon a dichotomy—some sort of Platonic concept—does not have an answer to nature; and we must say that much orthodoxy, much evangelical Christianity, is rooted in a Platonic concept. In this kind of Christianity there is only interest in the “upper story,” in the heavenly things—only in “saving the soul” and getting it to Heaven. In this Platonic concept, even though orthodox and evangelical terminology is used, there is little or no interest in the proper pleasure of the body or the proper uses of the intellect. In such a Christianity, there is a strong tendency to see nothing in nature beyond its use as one of the classic proofs of God’s existence. ‘Look at nature,’ we are told; ‘look at the Alps. God must have made them.’ And that is the end. Nature has become merely an academic proof of the existence of the Creator, with little value in itself. Christians of this outlook do not show an interest in nature itself. They use it simply as an apologetic weapon, rather than thinking or talking about the real value of nature.”

It is our observation that the problem of dualism has not disappeared in the years since Schaeffer’s time. As Christians we have a lot to say about the value of nature in itself and about the human to nature relationship, though we have not always made our claims clear. If we articulate our claims about nature more clearly, this will assist our thinking about the whole range of questions in social ethics and also show the distinctiveness of the Christian view in

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contrast with many other religions and worldviews. Sometimes the problem of dualism is only vaguely mentioned without a detailed explanation; at worst the term has been used to accuse other Christians of paradigm problems on matters of faith and creation. As part of renewing environmental ethics and our overall Christian public ethics, we think it is worthwhile to clarify and criticize multiple types of dualisms and to offer an outline of selected appropriate dualities which should overcome these various dualisms. Sometimes the articulation of dualities has been misunderstood to be teaching some type of dualism, but we think a proper understanding of dualities within the Christian worldview is a crucial step toward overcoming inappropriate dualisms. These dualities will also further clarify not only the differences of Christianity from humanism and pantheism (whether from the east or from the west) which Schaeffer articulated; these dualities will also clarify differences between Christianity and most varieties of Islam, which is important for all of public ethics in the 21st century, since a high percentage of our neighbors in much of global society follow some type of humanism/ secularism, some type of pantheism, or some type of Islam.

**Inappropriate dualisms**

Though our list is not exhaustive, we have encountered four or five distinct varieties of dualisms which we can describe. Some of these theological/ethical problems have come back repeatedly in the twenty centuries of our Christian history.

1. Zoroastrian dualism of the ancient world thought there were two powers of about equal power, one good and one evil. The world was seen as a conflict between these two powers, and evil actions by people might not really be their personal responsibility, because such actions may be under the power of the evil deity. There were echoes of this type of dualism in the beliefs among the followers Marcion, from the second century, to which the church responded in the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed. Though Christians believe in a devil or Satan, he is never described as even remotely comparable in power to God, since God is the Creator of all, including Satan. Christians traditionally describe Satan as a chief angel who fell into pride, which shows that Satan is incomparably less than God in every respect. A Zoroastrian type of dualism should be totally rejected by Christians.
2. Hellenistic dualism, which Schaeffer often called the Platonic concept, was also common in the ancient world and taught that only invisible spiritual entities are real and good, while the material, physical realm is either not fully real or not fully good. There were strong influences of this belief system in Gnosticism, and this idea tends to come back repeatedly throughout history, in Christian circles and also in the many varieties of New Age and the religions coming from India. It is completely the opposite of the biblical teaching about the goodness and reality of creation as seen in the first chapters of Genesis and the historic Christian creeds.

3. Medieval nature/grace dualism is somewhat like Hellenistic dualism, but it is partly adapted to central Christian beliefs. The physical realm of “nature” is seen as real, but it may not be very important to God and it may not be very good. According to this way of thinking, God is mostly interested in the unseen realm of grace, which is detached from the world of nature, and the Christian life does not have much to do with everyday life. Believers may be urged to ascend or escape from the world of nature to a higher realm of grace. This type of dualism also recurs in Christian circles throughout history. It is overcome once we see that God is very interested in his good creation, that God is very active in his good creation (by means of general revelation and providence), that Jesus became a real man with a real soul and body, and that salvation means the restoration of all of God’s creation.

4. The modern and postmodern public/private dualism says that faith or religion is a private and personal matter that has little or nothing to do with important public matters such as education, law, government, medicine, business, or the environment. This way of thinking suggests that faith may be privately interesting, but it is publicly irrelevant, since faith is viewed as irrational and public life must be strictly rational. This way of thinking is fundamentally an attack on core Christian beliefs which has prompted numerous Christian thinkers to write about both the rational coherence of the Christian faith and the significance of the biblical message for all the areas of public life. A proper understanding of the proper dualities of the Christian faith helps us see that God is extensively involved in all the important areas of public life, even if some people refuse to recognize God’s role in such things as practical wisdom, civic duty, or environmental care. Wise political and environmental rationality should be seen as a gift of God’s
common grace for the proper ordering of life together, to promote a proper care for
people and God’s world.

5. There is also a type of dualism which is really a special variety of the public/private
dualism. This says that natural science tells us the full truth about the physical world
while faith tells us something about our subjective world of feelings, hopes, values, and
meaning. This removes faith and religion from the realm of truth, while it also tends to
describe the physical world as a vast evolving machine without any concern for our
hopes, fears, and joys. This way of talking assumes atheism, but allows “simple”
believers to remain in their stupidity, if it makes them happy. Religion may be seen as
less harmful than drugs, if that is what it takes to help people find irrational meaning and
hope. As soon as we see that God is the Creator and Ground of all being and all truth, we
will react in horror to this type of dualism.

Many Christians will find a little of one or more of these types of dualism in their hearts and
minds since these dualisms are common in many cultures. One of the steps toward overcoming
the various dualisms is to learn to fully understand and appreciate the proper dualities of the
Christian faith, some of which we will explain below. We can describe these dualities as arising
from the difference between the work of the Father and that of the Son, as long as we do not
think there is any conflict between the work of the Father and the work of God the Son. The
connections between both parts of the proper dualities become clear when we see that Jesus, the
Christ, came to restore the creation of his Father and ours. The proper dualities of the Christian
faith are the opposite of the various dualisms which are contrary to the biblical message.

Proper Dualities of Christian Public Ethics

Our terminology of “dualities” arises from the Protestant Reformation; both Martin Luther and
John Calvin talked about God’s two kingdoms in their writings on ethics, which we have
modified to talk about the two-fold work of God in the world. Though there is complete unity of
purpose among the Persons of the Trinity, we think we can make a distinction among the
primary functions of each Person of the Trinity. In each of these six areas, we distinguish a two-
fold work of God in the world, the first of which is primarily the work of God the Father, the
second of which is primarily the work of God the Son, both of which are made effective in human experience by God the Holy Spirit.

1. There are two types of revelation. The first is God’s general revelation in creation, whereby God gives all people some awareness of himself and his power. Even though some people may reject and claim not to know God and reject his general revelation, God’s self-revelation through creation continues to provide the transcendental condition of human experience for all. There is also God’s special revelation in Christ and Holy Scripture, which leads to salvation and an accepted knowledge of God, and which has its center in the gospel of Christ. General revelation is primarily the work of God the Father through creation, whereas special revelation is primarily the work of Christ the Son and is very closely tied to redemption. Both types of revelation only reach their intended goals through the work of the Holy Spirit.

2. There are two ways in which God gives knowledge of his moral law. The first is a general knowledge of God’s law which is the gift of God to all mankind (via general revelation), even to those who reject this knowledge; there is also a much clearer and deeper knowledge of God’s law which comes in Moses, the Ten Commandments, the prophets, and the rest of the Bible, and which is always connected with God’s covenant of grace and redemption in Christ. Our knowledge of God’s moral will, both as revealed through creation and through scripture, is always dependent on the Holy Spirit.

3. There are two types of grace from God. He gives his common grace to all his creatures to make life possible, including human culture and knowledge, and to call humankind to repentance; the second type of grace is his special grace, that of salvation by faith in Christ. The Holy Spirit is the Person who must take the external gift of both types of grace and make them internally effective in the inner life of people and nations.

4. There are at least two types of righteousness. Active civil righteousness is a response to the external demand to practice civic responsibility in our various roles and situations; this righteousness is demanded of all people by God the Father by means of his Creation. Passive, spiritual righteousness is a response to the free gift of special grace, forgiveness, and salvation in Christ. Both types of righteousness are dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit. Civic environmental responsibility is in the realm of civil righteousness, but
it should be reinforced within the Christian community by a strong desire to care for God’s creation.

5. There are two types of wisdom. Practical wisdom is about how to live effectively in the world which God the Father has created; spiritual wisdom consists in a deep knowledge and grasp of the salvation and grace we are given in Christ. Both types of wisdom are dependent on the Holy Spirit, who gives all the true wisdom possessed by all people.

6. There are two kingdoms, meaning two ways in which God rules over our lives. The first is the kingdom of God in which God sometimes remains anonymous, whereby he providentially rules over the affairs of men and nations, using the mandates and structures of his world, to shape our lives, to restrain sin, and to fulfill his purposes. The second is the redeeming reign of Christ over our lives in which we consciously submit to his Word and seek to respond in faith and obedience to Christ as our Lord. Both ways in which God reigns are implemented in human decisions by means of the internal work of the Holy Spirit.

In Romans 13:1 Paul wrote, “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.” It is noteworthy that many of the authorities which Paul encountered, especially the Roman authorities, were not in any way “Christian” authorities. The Roman Empire and Emperor did not recognize the God of the Bible, and most local Roman governors and local rulers were not personally Christians. Nevertheless, Paul says they were established by God. This important biblical claim alternately assumes or implies most of the dualities mentioned here.

In all of these dualities just described, the first element is primarily the work of God the Father, while the second element is primarily the work of Christ, the Son. We must never forget that the Son was sent into the world by the Father to restore, save, and recreate the Creation and the creatures which were distorted, damaged, and misdirected by sin. This means that in each of these “twos” or dualities, the second element restores, completes, and renews the first. In older Christian language, “Grace restores nature.” This requires some explanation.

We can only properly understand and appreciate the Father’s general revelation through creation when we also accept special revelation in Christ and scripture; nevertheless, that general revelation has an essential role in the lives of all people as the condition that makes human life
possible. While the general revelation of God’s law, the natural moral law, allows most people to have some true knowledge of right and wrong, and to have some idea of moral responsibility, we can only fully grasp God’s moral law as it comes to us in Scripture. Nevertheless, the believer’s relationship to the unbelieving world may be distorted if we forget or minimize the natural moral law and think that all the people know about right and wrong comes only from the Bible. Common grace allows many people to live somewhat orderly, honorable, and peaceful lives, but without special grace in Christ, those orderly and honorable lives are empty, hopeless, and terribly misdirected, leading to a horrible end. Civil righteousness is a real possibility for many people, especially if they receive good moral formation from their parents and teachers, so that they can become good neighbors and good citizens. But that civil righteousness is without direction and deep content until it is renewed when the righteousness of faith leads people to want to glorify God in all of life; then civil righteousness is empowered and directed by spiritual righteousness.

**Dualities, Religions, and Public Ethics**

In all of the six ways previously mentioned, God the Father creates and Christ the Son redeems. The Son restores the work of the Father, and both actions are made effective in human experience by the Holy Spirit. This Trinitarian understanding of the world clarifies both the coherence of the Christian worldview and shows how it is different from the other worldviews that influence the thought of many about matters of public and environmental ethics. Secularism will generally say that nature simply is and that there is nothing behind or beyond nature which gives significance and meaning to nature. Pantheism will have difficulty maintaining a distinction between humans and nature while also giving clear reasons why people should do the good and avoid evil. And it is important to note that one of the differences between Christianity and most varieties of Islam is that Islam does not normally recognize these six dualities. The differences between Christianity and Islam are not only on the level of claiming to have different special revelations, different paths to salvation, differences on the possibility of certainty of salvation, and differences on many particular ethical questions. It is very difficult for most varieties of Islam to recognize such things as general revelation, common grace, God-given civil righteousness, a God-given natural moral law, or God-given practical wisdom among unbelievers. For this reason Muslims often want to derive their thinking and action for all of life,
culture, and government directly from their religious law, the Sharia. In contrast to secularism, pantheism, and Islam, Christians should recognize the ways in which God is directly working in his Creation, even if God sometimes remains partly anonymous or hidden because people suppress their awareness of God, and even if there is little or no direct influence of the Bible on some particular group of people.

Christians have not always been as clear as we should have been in our teaching about the twofold work of God in the world. Sometimes Christians have denied these dualities in a confused desire to be faithful to Christ, while at other times other Christians have talked as if special revelation, saving grace, and spiritual righteousness are unimportant. But in spite of these mistakes, the distinction between the common and special works of God, which recognizes the specificity but unity of the work of the three Persons of the Trinity, has been a very important factor in the shape of life and culture in the western world. Teaching about this distinction can make similar contributions in other cultures. This idea is behind such important cultural/legal practices such as the freedom of religion and the separation (without hostility) between church and state. This duality means that Christians have felt free to accept cultural gifts (such as education, government, technology, medicine, and law) from our culture, criticize our culture, and contribute to our culture, without demanding that our biblical faith be imposed on the culture as a condition of our culture’s legitimacy. This is very different from the moral/cultural perspectives arising from secularism, pantheism, or Islam.

A deep appreciation and understanding of the ongoing work of God in and through his creation should provide real depth of meaning to Christian environmental ethics. Our concern for the environment should not merely be an external need to obey the law or a vague concern for long-term human well-being. We should not only be thinking about consequences for our neighbors or our grandchildren if we do not care for the environment. We must never forget that this is our Father’s world, and how we treat his world illustrates what we think about our Father, regardless of any other results or consequences. Of course, God commissioned humanity to be active in his world, “to work it and take care of it,” (Genesis 2:15) but nature belongs to him and he is active in his creation in multiple ways, prior to his work of redemption in Christ.