

A New Story

by Eddie Glade

“Why is the sky blue?”—The proverbial question that every parent must answer. Why anything? Why are we the way we are? *How did things come to be this way?* These are the questions that mythology tries to answer. By this definition, every group of people that has some self-understanding has a mythology, and ours is no exception. Our mythology deeply affects the way we think and act. A series of books by Daniel Quinn, starting with *Ishmael*, has developed a form for our civilization’s myth, pointed out serious inherent problems, and suggested solutions. In light of current environmental and social crises, it seems more apparent than ever before that something is wrong with how we as humans order our lives. Ultimately, we will need to find a new mythology, or at least reevaluate the one we have.

First of all, who are we? In this essay, “we” or “our civilization” will be taken to mean all of modern industrialized society and everyone who is directly subject to it. In the West, the East, and even many third-world countries, the same underlying ideas seem to be in effect. This leaves out peoples who we have alternately labeled “savages,” “primitives,” “natives,” and “indigenous races.” The distinction is Quinn’s, and it will continue throughout this essay.

It may not be obvious why this distinction is being made. Especially here in the United States, people may not see changing our way of life as a necessity or even something that is desirable. In our abundance, we assume that abundance is the only way to live. However, it is becoming more evident that human decisions, both now and in the past, have been destructive, not only to the creation in which we live, but also to the possibilities for future human well-being.

It is often said that we have come to a “turning point in history.” Though it is slightly cliché, I contend that “now” is always the turning point in history because now is the time we are able to act. I do not claim that the world will end if we do nothing, but now is the time to change our worldview again—to turn to a story that will direct us away from destructive behaviors to behaviors that promote the well being of every part of creation.

The Problems We Face

Larry Rasmussen is one of many over the past few decades who has emphasized the problems attending our culture. In his book, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, he begins by pointing out places and times that we destroy our world and ourselves. The effects of an exponentially growing population and the consumption patterns of the richest countries in the world¹ are becoming apparent: every day, we are using as much energy as the earth receives from the sun in 27 years;² as much as 70 percent of global fish stocks are “depleted” or “almost-depleted;”³ as of the year 2000, 971 species were endangered (close to extinction) and 273 species were considered “threatened.”⁴ The fact that we have had to consciously check our ‘progress’ and take care of species we have intruded upon begins to indicate how destructive our behavior is.

Many other examples of the problems our practices lead to exist. Toxins and pollutants we release into the environment, such as pesticides, flame-retardants, nicotine-metabolites, and lead, are being stored in our bodies. Such environmental factors now account for about four percent of “global mortality.”⁵

¹ Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 151.

² *Ibid.*, 59.

³ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁴ *Environmental Resource Handbook*. 1st ed. Laura Mars-Proietti, et al., eds. (Millerton, NY: Grey House Publishing, 2001), 632, 851.

⁵ John Eyles and Nicole Consitt, “What’s at Risk?” *Environment* 46.8 (2004), 24-40. [EBSCO](http://www.epnet.com). <<http://www.epnet.com>> n.d.

Health will not be the only problem if current trends continue. An ever-increasing population like ours uses vast amounts of energy, whether “earth-stored” or solar. These rates of energy consumption (increasing by as much as 1.5% every year) are unsustainable. Energy consumption may outstrip production within 20 years.⁶

Those are in addition to the traditional environmental problems that the media covers, such as the greenhouse effect and general pollution. According to Harold Bernard, temperature changes over the course of the last century do indicate a correlation between CO₂ levels and slowly rising global temperatures.⁷ He also connects the record-breaking temperatures and droughts of the 1980’s to the global warming trend.⁸ Both global temperature trends⁹ and atmospheric CO₂ levels¹⁰ have been rising steadily throughout this century.

The now common problem of pollution is still with us. Americans dispose of approximately 1.2 billion tons of waste in a year.¹¹ Coral reefs, home to many marine animals, are disappearing, most likely due to water pollution from untreated sewage.¹² Despite the fact that pollution has dropped off dramatically since 1970, the Environmental Protection Agency reports that as of 1996, approximately 46 million Americans “lived in counties that did not meet the air quality standards.”¹³

To top off this list of ways that we damage the earth, social injustices continue to multiply. According to the *New York Times*, 1,260 United States armed service members have

⁶ Paul B. Weisz, “Basic Choices and Constraints on Long-Term Energy Supplies.” *Physics Today*. 57:7 (2004), 47-53. EBSCO. <<http://www.epnet.com>> n.d.

⁷ Harold W. Bernard, Jr., *Global Warming Unchecked: Signs to Watch For*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana U.P., 1993), 5-6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8-13.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹¹ Lynn Landes, “Garbage Pollution is a Serious Problem,” 18. In *Pollution: Opposing Viewpoints*, ed. by Tamara Roleff (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 2000), 17-20.

¹² Russell, Dick. “Water Pollution Is a Serious Problem,” 42. In *Pollution: Opposing Viewpoints*, ed. by Tamara Roleff (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 2000), 40-45.

¹³ Environmental Protection Agency. “Air Pollution is Declining,” 33. In *Pollution: Opposing Viewpoints*, ed. by Tamara Roleff (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 2000), 32-39.

died since the start of the Iraq war. Many more Iraqis have likely been killed. Racial or social tensions and violence continue in Israel/Palestine, Sudan, and Northern Ireland, to name a few. Over 1.2 billion of the earth's inhabitants are "destitute"—making a dollar or less per day—and an additional 3.6 billion are barely managing.¹⁴

These problems seem to be only the beginning, but what causes these problems? If our myths are the ideas that tell us who we are and what to do, it seems that something must be wrong. Something about our conception of ourselves as human beings seems to be going directly against the way the "natural world" works—the way God apparently intended it to work and the way archaeology and paleontology tell us that the ecosystem did work for millions of years. It therefore seems important to discover what our modern mythology is, then look for a way of changing it for the better.

Today's Myth

What Does Genesis Tell Us?

Some would point immediately to Genesis as the formative story of our culture. However, there are multiple ways of interpreting Genesis, from a strict historical/scientific account to a good allegory to a nice story. Creationists (who tend to be fundamentalist in their understanding of faith) believe that every word of the Bible is not only true but also scientifically and historically accurate. This leads them to believe that the account of creation and the beginning of the world in Genesis 1-11 is a documented, historical fact. Some may try to rationalize this belief with science, saying that scientific research proves creationism, while some go so far as to condemn science in general or attribute scientific evidence that disagrees with the Genesis creation account to the workings of the devil.

¹⁴ Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, 150.

Those who keep such a literal view of the Bible may be threatened by those who say that Genesis is a made-up story with no modern relevance. Granted, the universe appears to be several billion years old, no garden protected by fearsome *cheruvim* has been found along the Euphrates, and no snake outside of fantasy has been able to talk. However, saying that talking animals have no impact on today's culture would be as ridiculous as saying that a story about life, death, temptation, and pain—which is just as deeply ingrained in our culture as Looney Tunes—has no impact on the way we think about ourselves.

There is a middle position, and there are reasons for holding it. If one can accept that the Bible has gone through numerous transitions, authors, and redactors (who, we assume, were all devoted to preserving the message of God) to reach its present form, one can accept that Genesis 1-4 may not be a “factual” account of the beginning of the world in a scientific sense. Rather, it is a powerful, relevant story that tells us where we came from and where we are going.

Even this stance, however, has multiple possibilities for interpretation. If one pays attention to the “dominion” language (*kvš* and *rdh*, Genesis 1:28), one may believe that God means humans to conquer, subjugate, and reign over nature, doing whatever we wish with it. However, if one pays attention to the “serve and guard” (*‘vd* and *šmr*) and the “it was good” language (Genesis 2:15; 1:10; et al.), one will be more likely to see the inherent value in creation and to protect and live in harmony with it.

Benno Jacob, a Jewish scholar, specifically interprets “subdue” in Genesis 1:28 to mean that humans have unlimited power; “no human work on it can be called a violation of God's will.”¹⁵ Similarly, Marcus Dods (in 1903) argued:

¹⁵ Benno Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible: Genesis*. Ernest Jacob and Walter Jacob, trans. (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1974), 15-20.

This is indeed the very work God has given man to do—to subdue the earth and make the desert blossom as the rose [...] He who believes in God’s purpose and strives to reclaim nature and compel it to some better products than it naturally yields, is doing God’s work in the world.¹⁶

While Dods seems to encourage a focus on upholding life on earth, it seems far too easy to move from his idea of making the whole earth “bloom” to the idea that the whole earth should be organized as we humans see fit.

Background information on the Fall is also important in our understanding of “what went wrong.” Jacob views the Tree of Knowledge simply as a test of Adam, saying that it is “the prohibition that makes the fruit harmful.” Also, he asserts (in contrast to most Christian interpretations of Genesis) that the curse of Adam only applied to Adam, not all of humanity.¹⁷ Martin Luther’s commentary on Genesis takes a fairly traditional (Christian) approach to its meaning. Like Jacob, he saw the Tree as a test of obedience.¹⁸ For Luther, however, the Fall represented a split between innocent righteousness and the sin of disobeying the only command humans had been given, and death came into the world through that sin.¹⁹ Dods also emphasizes the shift from innocence to responsibility and knowledge of unworthiness.²⁰

In these interpretations, one sees an assumption that humans are supposed to be the rulers of all, which I contrast with the idea of original sin for a specific reason: Quinn interprets these aspects of the creation story in significantly different ways. Diverse Bible commentators put different spins on Genesis, but they all work from the same premise: despite numerous outside cultural influences on the Hebrews (such as Babylonian creation myths, the tree of life, or the ziggurats of Babylon), the creation myths in Genesis are distinctly Hebrew in origin. Daniel

¹⁶ Marcus Dods, “Genesis.” *An Exposition of the Bible* (Hartford, CT: The S. S. Scranton Co., 1903), 12.

¹⁷ Jacob, *Genesis*, 15-20.

¹⁸ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Commentary on Genesis*. J. Theodore Mueller, trans. Vol. 1. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), 47.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁰ Dods, “Genesis,” 11.

Quinn, however, has taken a different approach to examining the stories in Genesis 2-4, which is relevant here for its take on both creation and myth.

A New Reading of Genesis 1

Quinn begins his story differently, from the perspective of the gods (his generic term for the creative force(s) of the universe). The gods are debating among themselves about the best way to govern the world. They soon realize that no matter what action they take, some life will flourish and some will perish; the gazelle that lives today means one more starving lion. They are confounded; whether they take action or no action, some life will praise them and some life will curse them.²¹

Still wondering what to do, one suggests to the company of gods that they should eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, for then they will know when it is good for things to live and die. They do so, and they know how to govern the world justly; one day the lion goes hungry, the next she gets her fill. One day the gazelle lives, the next it is his time to die and become food.²² (Quinn sees the natural processes of life as an environmental ideal.)

As the gods see Adam “awakening,” they decide that it should be his quest to search for the Tree of Life. In Quinn’s view, this would mean learning how to live as a species for “the lifetime of this planet.”²³ The gods in this story know that the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil will do nothing for the Adam since it is intended for the gods, but it is still in the garden. The gods know that if Adam were to eat of that Tree, he would *believe* that he had the knowledge of what was to live and what was to die and in that belief he would take the power

²¹ Daniel Quinn, *Ishmael: An Adventure of the Mind and Spirit* (New York: Bantam/Turner, 1995), 156-59.

²² *Ibid.*, 159.

²³ *Ibid.*, 161.

of the gods into his own hands and become a destructor of the world around him. For this reason they forbid him to eat of that Tree.²⁴

Quinn doesn't see why people of our cultural background would have come up with Genesis 2 and 3 in their present form—it seems to fundamentally disagree with the way we live our lives. By examining the attitude of humanity toward everything else, Quinn concluded that our driving idea is this: “The world was made for man [*sic*] to conquer and rule, and under human rule it was meant to become a paradise.”²⁵ This statement requires significant unpacking. Quinn begins with the premise that something must be wrong with our way of thinking, for we seem to have undone in 10,000 years of civilization what went on in an orderly fashion for millions of years before that. He proposes that one group of humans at that time decided they didn't want to live by nature's rules, expanded, and convinced or forced other groups to believe the same thing.

Bearing in mind Quinn's distinction between those who violate natural law (as we do by deciding which species we want to live and which ones can be exterminated) and those who do not (indigenous peoples), the remainder of Genesis 3 and 4 can be examined. If the Hebrews (part of our cultural paradigm) had come up with the story, he continues, why would eating the fruit of the Knowledge of Good and Evil be sinful? Humans, we say, aren't supposed to live like animals—at the mercy of the gods—we're supposed to work the ground, make bread by the sweat of our brow, and, in doing so, make our own way in the world.²⁶

Although some modern theologians would dispute Quinn on this point, he has one more statement to make about the formation of our mythology. If agriculturalist Jews didn't come up with the stories, where did they come from? Quinn's answer is the Semites—the herding,

²⁴ Ibid., 161-65.

²⁵ Quinn, *Ishmael*, 82.

²⁶ Ibid., 165-67.

nomadic ancestors of the Hebrews. Quinn points out that at the time of the Agricultural Revolution (which started ca. 8500 B.C.), growing numbers of agricultural societies were still surrounded by multitudes of peoples who lived in different (presumably less destructive) ways. When the Semites, who were one of these peoples, began to have masses of “tillers of the soil” encroach upon their land and everyone else’s, they found a reason to explain why: the people from between the Tigris and the Euphrates thought they had the knowledge of good and evil, and so they had no problem wiping out the shepherding people of “Abel.”²⁷ Cyrus Gordon also suggests that the story of Cain and Abel reflects the conquest of nomadic tribes by settled farmers.²⁸

Quinn asserts that this explanation solves the mystery that no one has been able to solve: why was Abel’s offering acceptable while Cain’s was not?²⁹ Though some biblical scholars would doubtless disagree with this interpretation,³⁰ it provides interesting material for thinking about mythology as it has been passed on to us. Why do we live the way we do? Why do we consume resources and allow other species to die out? Why do we poison the only habitat we have to live in? For Quinn, the answer is that we have fundamentally deceived ourselves by thinking that it is our right to choose when we will die and that we are meant to subdue the world.

Where Does Our Myth Appear?

While not everyone in our civilization would agree with Quinn’s statement of our mythology, some would openly accept it and defend it vehemently. Indeed, there are numerous references in popular culture and in academia that would promote this exact ideal: that

²⁷ Quinn, *Ishmael*, 169-73.

²⁸ Cyrus H. Gordon, *The World of the Old Testament* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1958), 38.

²⁹ Quinn, *Ishmael*, 173.

³⁰ e. g. Dods, “Genesis,” 13.

humankind is meant to have mastery over the earth. On television, Jeeps, Land Rovers, and Sport Utility Vehicles range freely across the landscape, regardless of what terrain they trample. Americans and Europeans from the city feel ‘disconnected from nature,’ and so we put animals and wilderness in cages for the masses to look at. Similarly, those who had lived on this continent for thousands of years (not without impact but without such widespread destruction) were confined to wilderness cages. Opposition to these measures was stifled, and in some cases the established church has been there to back them up (recall Dods’ willingness to subdue the earth ‘for God,’ thinking we could do better).

Another contemporary example of the arrogance of humanity is found on the website of an organization called the BLTC (no explanation for the abbreviation is provided). They were founded with the intention of promoting “paradise-engineering.” They believe that it is humankind’s destiny to overcome evolution and take the next step by using genetic modification and certain drugs. The result, of course, will be a paradise, not only for all humans, but also for “all sentient life.”³¹ This extravagant claim of salvation—if only we can develop a little more technology—is only one marker of our attitude towards the rest of creation.

If Quinn’s statement—the world was made for man to conquer and rule—represents even vaguely how we think of ourselves as a people, what is wrong with it? Although the destruction of the natural world and its resources are a primary concern of Quinn’s, he points further to a cultural collapse that has already begun. Thousands of years of burgeoning population, he says, have led to increasing social problems: war, crime, famine, plague, genocide, economic collapse, and, finally, a “collapse of values.”³² This collapse, according to Quinn, happens

³¹ BLTC, “Mission Statement of BLTC Research.” <<http://www.bltc.com>> n.d.

³² Daniel Quinn, *The Story of B: An Adventure of the Mind and Spirit* (New York: Bantam, 1997), 276.

whenever a mythology no longer supports a way of life.³³ If our myth tells us that we are the rulers of the world, we are certainly being disillusioned of it. The reaction of the creation tells us that we are not as dominant as we think, that we never have been, and never will be.

Today's Myth: Other Perspectives

As early as the 1950's, various scholars and writers were starting to worry about the direction our culture was heading. Most of them did not assume that the problems started with the Agricultural Revolution, as Quinn does. Joseph Krutch, for example, labels our mythology "generous materialism"—Americans acquire vast amounts of wealth and spend a lot of it on others (children, for example) because we believe everyone else ought to have as much as we do.³⁴ We measure our quality of life by how many novelties and conveniences we possess.³⁵ Advertisers want us to believe that increased consumption will solve all our problems.³⁶ It seems we "must run as fast as we possibly can if we are to remain where we are."³⁷ Krutch also provides a fitting aphorism for our culture, "Waste or you will want."³⁸

The idea that we are supposed to consume as much as possible to give everyone else something to produce is frighteningly similar to Aldous Huxley's superstate in *Brave New World*,³⁹ and yet it is more true today than when he predicted it in 1932. This argument is as old as commercials and department stores: as soon as one turns on the television, radio, or internet browser or walks into the local Super Wal-Mart, one is barraged with enticements to buy more items that one got along without yesterday but must have today to "keep up with the Jones's."

³³ Ibid., 277.

³⁴ Joseph W. Krutch, *Human Nature and the Human Condition* (New York: Random House, 1959), 6-7.

³⁵ Ibid., 9-10.

³⁶ Ibid., 29.

³⁷ Ibid., 13.

³⁸ Ibid., 23.

³⁹ In *Brave New World*, all aspects of human life are artificially controlled and both consumption and disposal are encouraged through phrases such as, "Ending is better than mending."

The consumerist mythology is certainly prevalent in our society and at least correlates with the growing use of energy and materials.⁴⁰

Northrop Frye, in the process of giving lectures for Canada's centennial celebration in 1967, talked about the state of our "modern century." He also talked about "the mythology of our day" being dominated by two concepts: alienation and progress.⁴¹ In alienation, one feels utterly disconnected from what is important. He gives the example of losing our sense of control, whether by the knowledge that some oppressor is in charge or by the thought that a single freak Cold War accident could destroy everything.⁴² He recognizes the fact that no individual would advocate our tendency towards commercialization, but we are all somehow captives of this system.⁴³ Similarly, Quinn started his discussion in *Ishmael* by asserting our captivity in a social system.⁴⁴

Like Quinn, Frye was trying to convince his audience to break away from the illusions our culture provides us. This illusion, as he portrays it, is that "progress" will inevitably lead to the solution of current societal problems.⁴⁵ In contrast, he asserts that progress, as we use the term today, is actually a form of alienation. Progress, he continues, gives us autonomy, but autonomy separates,⁴⁶ and so he rejects it as a model of human behavior.⁴⁷

In an almost darkly humorous illustrated book, *Mankind May Never Make It!*, Robert Osborn paints a dreary picture of humanity's chances for survival. Osborn critiques our indecisiveness, our mechanization, our exploding world population, and our continual use of warfare to achieve national ends. Though the cartoon illustrations and huge font size make it

⁴⁰ Cf. Rasmussen and Weisz.

⁴¹ Northrop Frye, *The Modern Century: The Whidden Lectures 1967* (London: Oxford U.P., 1969), 23.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 23-25.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

⁴⁴ Quinn, *Ishmael*, 25-26.

⁴⁵ Frye, *The Modern Century*, 29-30.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

look like it might be a children's book, the message is as serious as any other: change our way of life or we will destroy each other.⁴⁸

Also worth considering is the noted article by Lynn White, who accused the Christian church of being the primary contributor to “our ecologic crisis.” White began the article by showing how technology used to exploit earth's resources (starting, for him, with the invention of a vastly more efficient plow in the seventh century)⁴⁹ is responsible for our current predicament. Technology does allow us to use resources (and harm each other) much more effectively, but that is not where he ends his argument. Like many others, he claims that the underlying cause is an attitude. This attitude, he asserts, is based on the Christian understanding of Genesis and the church's purging of nature religions that held a deep respect for the earth.⁵⁰ Further, he claims that Christianity has no potential for respecting the natural world⁵¹—unless we adopt St. Francis as our patron saint.⁵²

A more recent theological writer, H. Paul Santmire, sees our human vision as one of domination, according to which it is not only allowed but encouraged for us to exploit the natural world with no concern for the well-being of ourselves, our descendants, or even of the “natural systems themselves.” Under this understanding of the cosmos, the natural world has no inherent value and in fact is meant for us to use as we please.⁵³ Santmire realizes this perception is not new and in fact bears much in common with Gnosticism, an ancient doctrine declared heretical by the Christian church that sees the material world as inherently evil.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Robert Osborn, *Mankind May Never Make It!* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, n.d.).

⁴⁹ Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.” *Machina Ex Deo: Essays in the Dynamism of Western Culture* (Cambridge: M.I.T., 1968), 83.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 84-86.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 91-94.

⁵³ H. Paul Santmire, *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

Similarly, Landon Gilkey sees the cause of the ecological crisis as the “insatiable greed” of humans combined with the use of our “infinite” technological creativity.⁵⁵ In a theological sense, we see only ourselves as being made in the image of God and forget that all of creation is God’s handiwork.⁵⁶

A New Myth

If what all these authors are saying is correct, we have a major task ahead of us: to rewrite our cultural mythology—that is, what we tell ourselves and each other about how things came to be this way. If we understand our place on earth as rulers who may do anything to ensure our own survival, we will continue to do anything and everything to this planet, its life, and its resources. On that path, it seems, is destruction. Which extreme outcome would happen first—global war, nuclear winter, worldwide famine, or extinction resulting from eradication of all diversity among other forms of life—is unsure, but all of these seem possible if we tell ourselves that we are here to subjugate the earth. On the other hand, if those who recognize the necessity of living with the earth instead of against it can convince others to change, humanity may have a chance.

Though it seems necessary to fundamentally change our way of thinking about our relationship to the world, the question remains, “How?” Numerous authors have described new modes of thinking. Some of them try to revolutionize Christianity and some try to eschew it, while others simply ignore religion as a factor.

Gilkey, a Christian author, suggests that the beginning of this change is to realize that we are creatures of “both flesh *and* spirit.”⁵⁷ If we remember our tie to the created world we may

⁵⁵ Langdon Gilkey, *Blue Twilight: Nature, Creationism, and American Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 5.

⁵⁶ Gilkey, *Blue Twilight*, 8-9.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

remember better that we need to take care of it. However, he adds, we need not only a new myth for our society but also the ability to critique our myths.⁵⁸ It seems logical that if our current myth requires ‘tweaking,’ a new myth would also need to be analyzed; therefore I offer these as preliminary criteria for examining the other ideas that are to come:

- It recognizes itself as a myth
- It tells us who we are, how we got here, and where we’re going.
- It promotes ‘intra-human’ cooperation and ‘inter-species’ peace.

These criteria are by all means open to debate and rethinking, but a start must be made. Also, they are intentionally non-religious to keep initial options as open as possible, though I believe it is also possible to have a Christian understanding of the creation that meets them. Gilkey’s idea of accepting flesh with spirit and death with life⁵⁹ should be the first of those evaluated.

Gilkey tells his readers that we are mortal, that we must accept mortality for now but be confident in a life to come. His paradigm fits the second criterion and tells us something important about who we are, but gives us no additional basis for understanding our relationships with one another.

To combat our current myth of “domination,” Santmire also gives his readers ideas for understanding the creation in new ways. He agrees with Augustine that the “material order has not fallen” along with humanity.⁶⁰ He asks his readers to realize that creation is a process that did not end with humans. Rather, it continues and affects everything we do.⁶¹ He also describes a new relationship. Instead of only thinking about relationships between people (I-Thou) and our

⁵⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁵⁹ Gilkey, *Blue Twilight*, 170-71.

⁶⁰ Santmire, *Nature Reborn*, 26.

⁶¹ Ibid., 37-39.

relationship to things (I-It), he develops a new category describing the relationship between people and non-sentient beings (I-Ens). The point of this relationship is to help us realize that humans are not the only things that affect and are affected.⁶² Next to Gilkey, Santmire picks up some of the slack. Santmire gives us a basis for relating to each other and the creation.

Like Gilkey and Santmire, Rasmussen emphasizes the need to rethink our symbols in a Christian context, but reminds us that cosmologies matter only if they are expressed as actions.⁶³ He gives a good example of what is to be done in the city of Kalundborg, Denmark, in which each of several industries found ways to put the “waste” output of the other industries to good use. They did not set out to “mimic nature,” but they found the value of making their community work together.⁶⁴ Rasmussen ultimately gives us a new way of looking at the world: what must be done is realize that we are part of the community of the cosmos, the whole creation, and take appropriate action on an appropriate scale.⁶⁵ Rasmussen tells us what to do and where to go.

Finally I return to Quinn. His interpretations of Genesis and our world problems seem to be unique, and he also begins to answer the question, “Where do we go from here?” Though I simplify his thought process here, his eventual conclusion is that the indigenous cultures have it right. Not in the sense that they’re more ‘noble,’ but in the sense that what they pass on to their offspring is how to live, and, within each tribe, their cultures have adapted and survived for thousands of years and continue to do so where we haven’t destroyed their way of life.⁶⁶

Quinn sees those cultures “in the hands of the gods”⁶⁷—continuing to be subject to the laws of nature and therefore evolving. He concludes that their fundamental attitude is “man was

⁶² Santmire, *Nature Reborn*, 68-73.

⁶³ Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, 321.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 322-24.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 324-37.

⁶⁶ Quinn, *Ishmael*, 204-6.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 229.

made for the world, just like everything else.”⁶⁸ He sees this as being a workable mythology and even gives us something to hope for in lieu of dominating the world. He believes that, if we survive our cultural infancy, we will be the trailblazers of intelligence—an example of how to live for any sentient minds that come after us.⁶⁹

Quinn gives us an idea that tells us where we came from, where we are going, and how things came to be this way. It is, furthermore, a way that could remedy our attitude towards each other and the creation. However, to be fair, some people (thought none to speak of in the world of academia) have been highly critical of Quinn’s work and the assumptions he makes.

Ronald Bailey, for example, rather untactfully rips *Ishmael* to shreds. First, he reminds his readers that the lifestyle of hunter-gatherers included high rates of disease, infant mortality, and starvation. He says that the natural law Quinn has proposed is unrealistic because the short-term advantage of destroying your competitors will always out-compete long-term prudence. He further argues that we are in fact more prudent than our ancestors because we create new resources.⁷⁰

Quinn’s perspective is not perfect, but he does answer these objections fairly well. Quinn is not saying we should go back to the days before medicine and hospitals, and the ability to produce more food hasn’t kept famine from being a problem. Bailey claims that Quinn’s law of nature is unstable, but the natural world was apparently stable enough in the long term to produce us without decimating the environment. Also, if we are consuming earth’s stored energy 10,000 times faster than we receive it from the sun,⁷¹ no creation of new resources will be

⁶⁸ Ibid., 239.

⁶⁹ Quinn, *Ishmael*, 241-42.

⁷⁰ Bailey, Ronald. “Malthusian Twaddle: Overpopulation Fiction in the Novel *Ishmael*.” *Reason Online*. <<http://www.reason.com/rb/rb072303.shtml>> July 23, 2003.

⁷¹ Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, 59.

sufficient. Since Quinn's books are in novel format, the details are sometimes overlooked in favor of rhetoric, but the challenges he issues are solid and must be taken seriously.

A Composite Story; Looking Ahead

It seems obvious that something is drastically wrong with our treatment of the world. Some would say the situation is not nearly as bad as it looks, and they may be right, but I prefer to err on the side of informed caution. The problem may be older or younger than the 10,000 years Quinn suggests, but the fact remains that the way we think about ourselves—as the rightful rulers of creation—leads to actions that are destroying our world and ourselves.

Genesis informs us that we are part of God's good creation, and we should behave accordingly. Our current cultural myth sets us up as the masters. It is a comforting position to take, but it will not be effective for much longer. Numerous thinkers and writers have taken up the subject and concluded that we need to change. Ultimately, I believe this should take the form of a story, for we are story-telling animals: we must learn to live with the fact of death, we must learn to respect each other and nature, we must learn to live together, we must learn that we do not have the authority (or, thankfully, the responsibility) to govern this world. This is the beginning of the message that needs to be spread.

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