This issue’s cover article by Brian Godawa, “Avatar: A Postmodern Pagan Myth” (p. 08) dovetails nicely with Dan Story’s feature article, “Are Animists Model Environmentalists?” (p. 44), and that’s the way we planned it. We all hear repeatedly about the environmental crises currently confronting the nations of planet Earth, including but not limited to potentially catastrophic climate change, depletion of the atmospheric ozone layer, rapid disappearance of rain forests, actual and potential environmental contamination through nuclear waste seepage and oil spills, industrial and urban pollution of air and water, and greatly accelerated extinction of species.

While some would debate the validity of one or more of these concerns, no one with a grip on reality would argue that there are no valid environmental concerns at all. How then did we get to this place, and how do we change course to a more sustainable future? This magazine is not the place to tackle such complex questions, except as they bear on Christian apologetics—which they do, for it has long been fashionable to blame Christianity at least partly for the planet’s environmental woes.

The reasoning often follows this line: these crises were brought on by rapid and often unchecked industrialization and urbanization in the Western world and now are being multiplied by rapid and often unchecked industrialization and urbanization in the developing world. The original Industrial Revolution (beginning in eighteenth-century England) was often justified by appeal to the Dominion Mandate in Genesis 1:28, in which God commanded humanity to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (NASB; emphases added). Although other influences have since contributed to massive consumption of the earth’s resources for short-term benefit without proper regard for long-term consequences, critics allege that the Judeo-Christian creation story continues to play a key role in providing theological justification for environmental exploitation and abuse.

Many advocates of this view further argue that what we need now is a new creation myth that teaches an ethic of ecological balance and of reverence for the Earth. Such a New Age myth would use pantheism to infuse nature with a divine essence, put other forms of life on an equal footing with humanity, and portray all life on Earth not only as interconnected and interdependent, but also as evolving into a single planetary being and consciousness. Whether such people invoke the Gaia hypothesis (see Godawa’s article), the nature worship of neopagans, or the static (and therefore nonindustrial) cultures of animistic societies, they maintain that it’s time for Westerners to trade in their violent and polarizing sky god (i.e., Yahweh) for an embracing and holistic Earth goddess.

The attempt to promote a cultural conversion to such a new myth has been a serious enterprise for decades. I wrote about it at length in this magazine in the 1980s and in my 1989 Baker book, A Crash Course on the New Age Movement. New myth advocates utilize both academic and popular media in works of both nonfiction and fiction. None have been more spectacular, with greater potential to effect such a conversion, however, than the unparalleled blockbuster movie, Avatar. Brian Godawa provides an incisive critique of the film while Dan Story adds helpful perspective on the related question of animism.
Due to space limitations, I can only briefly contribute to this discussion. First, the search for an eco-friendly religion begs the question of whether a religion is objectively true. Religion deals with ultimate questions such as the meaning of life, the basis and nature of morality, and the way to achieve both temporal and eternal salvation. One’s religion should be selected on the basis of its coherence with reality, not on its seeming pragmatic value in one or more areas of life.

Furthermore, if a religion does correspond with reality, then how could it be truly inferior to a false religion in any area of life? It must, in the final analysis, be superior. Therefore, if people have used true religion to justify environmental abuse, it must be that they have abused the religion as well as the environment by taking the religion’s teachings out of context.

But, the new myth advocate counters, didn’t God tell man to rule over the earth? Yes, but as I wrote twenty-four years ago, the scriptural model of rulership never allows the “ruler to exploit and abuse his subjects: “On the contrary, it calls for care, protection, and wise, just administration (e.g., Ps. 72; 82; Jer. 22:1–5; Ezek. 34:1–22).” Clearly God entrusted the Earth to man as a stewardship, since He Himself never ceased to own it (Ps. 24:1; 50:12). Furthermore, “since God established an order in His creation, and gave us the capacity to understand it, then to the best of our ability, we are responsible to maintain it.” If God went to the extent of bringing every species to Noah for preservation on the Ark, then it follows that we are responsible likewise to preserve God’s amazing creations. If He saw fit to create a protective ozone layer in the atmosphere, then we would be fools not to redirect any human activity that is depleting it. The same reasoning applies to rainforest destruction, pollution, and any other byproduct of human activity that is diminishing or threatening God’s creation.

Certainly, a culture that follows the Dominion Mandate will be dynamic and not static, harnessing human ingenuity and natural resources to realize humanity’s God-given potential. But this is compatible with what reasonable environmentalists advocate, since they are not calling us to abandon civilization but rather to limit urban sprawl to a more appropriate scale, develop cleaner technology, protect unique ecosystems, and so forth.

Pantheism may seem to elevate nature by infusing it with a divine quality, but historically pantheism has rather produced indifference to nature by teaching it is a meaningless illusion to be overcome in order to achieve enlightenment. Pantheistic systems can only glamorize nature by inconsistently incorporating biblical notions of creation’s inherent goodness into their worldview.

The Bible provides the most solid ground possible (the very word of Almighty God) for both the inherent value of all creation (Gen. 1:31) and for the superior value of humanity that we humans instinctively sense to be true—for humans alone were created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26). The Bible therefore does not support some of the demands of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and other extreme environmental positions. If they or one of their loved ones were diagnosed with colon cancer, for example, how many PETA members would reject a successful immunization therapy if they found out it was developed by injecting colon cancer cells into rats? It seems in most cases an epiphany would occur and the superior value of a human being to a rat would at last be recognized.

Let the PETA members work for more humane methods of experimenting with animals without opposing all such experimentation, lest a greater evil than abuse of animals be committed. Without the dual poles of creation’s inherent value and humanity’s superior value providing the necessary tension in environmental ethics, what may appear to be humane treatment of animals at first light can prove to be inhumane treatment of our own kind under the full light of day. We see then that the Bible, coherent as always with reality, supports a doctrine of creation care, but it does so with a sense of proportion, rejecting any misguided doctrine of egalitarianism among all God’s creatures.

—Elliot Miller

NOTES

2 Miller, “The ‘New Myth’: A Critique.”

3 Ibid.
