



STATEMENT DN048

**A Summary Critique:  
Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit  
Al Gore (Houghton Muffin, 1992)  
by Dean C. Halverson**

The title to Vice President Al Gore's book — *Earth in the Balance* — is based on an illustration used by the White House for a 1990 conference on the environment. The illustration depicts a balance with the earth on one side and six gold bars on the other. Gore interprets the illustration to mean that the Bush administration was trying “to convince the world that the environment faces no serious dangers and that the wisdom of any effort to rescue it is outweighed by the cost” (p. 193).

Obviously, Gore disagrees with such a sentiment. He instead believes that the problems facing the environment are of such urgency that we may soon reach “a kind of point of no return” (38).

Moreover, as the book's subtitle (*Ecology and the Human Spirit*) indicates, Gore believes that the core problem behind the environmental crisis is spiritual. In his own words: “The more deeply I search for the roots of the global environmental crisis, the more I am convinced that it is an outer manifestation of an inner crisis that is, for lack of a better word, spiritual” (12).

What does Gore mean by “spiritual”? He defines it as “the *collection of values and assumptions* that determine our basic understanding of how we fit into the universe” (12, emphasis added). As the reader becomes increasingly aware, Gore does indeed *collect* his “values and assumptions.”

### **SYNCRETISTIC TENDENCIES**

While Gore is forthright about his allegiance to Christianity, it is evident that Christianity is only one of several belief systems from which he has collected his beliefs. The others include secular humanism (particularly the theory of evolution) and the New Age movement.

With respect to his commitment to Christianity, Gore writes: “My own faith is rooted in the unshakable belief in God as creator and sustainer, a deeply personal interpretation of and relationship with Christ” (368). This statement seems clear enough. But Gore clouds the issue of the depth and genuineness of his faith by also making statements that clearly come from an evolutionary perspective. His evolutionary perspective, moreover, is not just that of *microevolution* (change occurs within species) — which is acceptable to biblical creationists, but of *macroevolution* (species evolve into other species; *see* 63, 229).

One might think Gore is coming from the perspective of theistic evolution, which says God uses the means of evolution to produce the diversity of life. While it's possible that such is Gore's perspective, he never makes that kind of statement. Instead, when he speaks as a Christian, he uses strictly theistic terminology but when he speaks as an evolutionist, he uses strictly evolutionary terminology. He never synthesizes the two perspectives.

It would also appear that the New Age movement has influenced Gore's thinking and that he has “collected” several of his beliefs from it. The following are some of the chief indicators of that influence.

First, Gore reveals that he buys into the New Age interpretation at quantum (subatomic) physics. He writes: “There is even, in this emerging scientific view, a palpable ‘physical’ role for human thought in the shaping of reality. Erwin Schrodinger, a pioneer in quantum physics, first offered the astounding view that consciousness is one of the building blocks of the physical universe...” (254). Gore apparently believes that the significance of quantum theory is that the mind brings external reality into actuality.

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Some explanation of the issues is in order here. When dealing with objects the size of subatomic particles, one deals in probabilities rather than predictable certainties. In experiments with subatomic particles there are several possible results. Scientists can predict only the *probabilities* of those results, but they cannot predict with certainty the *actual* result. Some contend, then, that between the beginning of the experiment and the act of observing its conclusion, all possible and contradictory results exist simultaneously. Only when the observation of the result is made does one of the possibilities become an actuality. Gore's statement indicates that he buys into the typically New Age interpretation that it is the *consciousness of the observer* that causes one of the possibilities to become an actuality. The implication of such an interpretation is that the observer creates reality.

Such a view, however, confuses the *psychical* act of registering the experiment's results with the *physical* act of doing the same. Werner Heisenberg, one of the original developers of quantum theory, says that "the transition from the 'possible' to the 'actual' takes place as soon as the interaction of the object with the measuring device, and thereby with the rest of the world, has come into play; it is not connected with the act of registration of the result by the mind of the observer." (*Physics and Philosophy* [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958], 54-55.) Moreover, Gore's view that reality is shaped by the subjective consciousness of the observer cannot account for why the probabilities of a quantum experiment come out the same no matter who makes the observation or how many times the experiment is performed.

Second, Gore's language suggests New Age influence by his seeming inference that picking one's religion is a matter of personal preference, and that Christianity is no more true than are other religions. For example, whenever Gore talks about his Christian faith, he qualifies his remarks with the words *my own*, as in "*My own* religious tradition," or "*my own* faith" (202, 368, emphasis added). The inference appears to be that it's fine for a person to choose Christianity, but choosing any other religion is equally valid. (Certainly, one might expect a politician to choose such language diplomatically when addressing a wide audience; but the more Gore explains his thinking [see, e.g., "Gore's Criterion for Truth" below] the more New Age such qualified references to "his" religion appear.)

Gore's explanation of the word "faith" is also troubling in that he talks about faith being "just a word unless it is invested with personal meaning" (368). Are we to understand from this that faith is a matter of personal preference and the existence of objective truth is not a matter for concern when choosing one's faith?

Third, Gore states that the problem of the environment is primarily "spiritual," but he goes on to say that the environmental problem can be addressed by humanity changing its "perspective" or "thinking" (49,55). For example, Gore writes: "The transformation of the way we relate to the earth will of course involve new technologies, but *the key changes will involve new ways of thinking about the relationship itself*" (35, emphasis added). The point is that what Gore means by "spiritual" is how we *think* about our relationship to the environment; it is not about the state of our relationship with a transcendent God. Such an identification of the spiritual with the mental is typically New Age.

## **GORE'S CRITERION FOR TRUTH**

Although Gore draws his beliefs from three world views that contradict each other in many ways, he nevertheless employs a criterion for truth by which he determines which beliefs should be accepted as part of his "collection." That criterion is *connection*. If a belief promotes the view that humanity is connected to the earth, he accepts it.

The view that humanity is connected to all things is the paradigm shift Gore says must take place before environmental problems can be resolved. Gore writes that what has led to "the global environmental crisis as a whole" is that "we have assumed that our lives need have no real connection to the natural world, that our minds are separate from our bodies, and that as disembodied intellects we can manipulate the world any way we choose" (144).

What we need, says Gore, is a "new story" at the foundation of our culture. He then raises the hope of the Christian by defending the biblical story of humanity being God's appointed stewards of the earth, and saying that we need "a fresh telling of our story with the distortions removed" (218).

Unfortunately, this "fresh telling of our story" never materializes. Instead, Gore's "new story" divinizes humanity and the earth by saying they share the same essence as God. This becomes evident when Gore, after asking why it feels "faintly heretical to a Christian to suppose that God is in us as human beings" (264), illustrates his belief in God's indwelling presence with the analogy of a hologram:

Each tiny portion of the hologram contains a tiny representation of the entire three-dimensional image, but only faintly.... Similarly, I believe that the image of the Creator, which sometimes seems so faint in the tiny corner of creation each of us beholds, is nonetheless present in its entirety — and present in us as well. If we are made in the image of God, perhaps it is the

myriad slight strands from earth's web of life — woven so distinctively into our essence — that make up the “resistance pattern” that reflects the image of God, faintly. By experiencing nature in its fullest — our own and that of all creation — with our sense and with our spiritual imagination, we can glimpse, “bright shining as the sun,” an infinite image of God (265).

What Gore has done with the hologram analogy is to suggest that the “image of God” flows from what he calls the “web of life.” This web of life bears an uncomfortable resemblance to the impersonal, divine oneness of Hinduism and the New Age. Such an implicitly pantheistic concept is in stark contrast to the theism of Christianity.

### **HUMANITY IS ONE AMONG MANY SPECIES**

Besides using the hologram analogy to connect humanity and the earth through the pantheistic web of life, Gore also uses that analogy to bring into question the uniqueness of humanity. He asserts, through the analogy, that *all creation contains a faint picture of the image of God*.

But is all creation indeed invested with the image of God? While the Bible says creation gives evidence to the “work of his hands” (Ps. 19:1; Rom. 1:20), it never says all creation contains the image of God. The Bible instead says *humanity alone* is invested with the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). Furthermore, it is this image of God within humanity that sets us apart, making us unique compared to the rest of creation.

Contrary to such biblical teaching, Gore questions humanity's uniqueness. He writes: “At some point during [humanity's] journey we lost our feeling of connectedness to the rest of nature. We now dare to wonder: Are we so unique and powerful as to be essentially separate from the earth? Many of us act — and think — as if the answer is yes” (1). Gore's question confuses the issue, though. In one sense, *no*, we are not separate from the elements of the earth. But in the sense that humanity alone is made in the image of God, *yes*, we are separate and unique from the rest of creation. But Gore denies the validity of the *yes* answer, and thus denies our sense of uniqueness.

### **AIMED IN THE WRONG DIRECTION**

The reason Gore brings humanity's uniqueness into question is that he believes the attitude that we are unique has led to the false belief that we are separate from the earth; and this attitude of separation, he says, has caused the environmental crisis. “If we see ourselves as separate from the earth,” Gore contends, “we find it easy to devalue the earth...until we see that all life is precious, we will continue to degrade both the human community and the natural world” (162). (One wonders how Gore can reconcile his pro-abortion stance with his challenge to see “all life as precious.”) Through the phrase “all life is precious,” he again raises the theme of connectedness, for “all life is precious” precisely because all things are connected to the “web of life.”

For Gore, this sense of being connected with all things is the essence of what he means by “spiritual.” But such an understanding of “spiritual” reveals how his spirituality is aimed in the wrong direction — *toward the creation* rather than *toward the Creator*. Gore is concerned with humanity's sense of separation from the earth, but he does not seem to be concerned about humanity's separation from a holy and transcendent God. As a result, his statement of the spiritual problem behind the environmental problem falls far short. He fails to look deep enough for the true source of our sense of being separated from the environment — our separation from God.

The reason humanity has felt free to exploit the resources of the earth is that we have lost our sense of accountability and stewardship to the creation's Creator; we have separated ourselves from Him. All of humanity's separations or alienations — from oneself, from one's family, from other people, between nations, and from the environment — are rooted in our separation and alienation from God. And these are caused by our rebellion against Him. It is the relationship between us and God that needs to be restored before the other relationships can be healed.

### **REMOVING THE MOTIVATION**

Gore argues that we will have a better motivation for caring for the earth when we see ourselves as connected with it, and as we've seen, he bases that connection on the pantheistic “web of life.” The problem with Gore's reasoning, though, is that by basing life's value on an impersonal web of life he diminishes the value of all life to its lowest common denominator. Consequently, human life becomes no more valuable than the life of a rat or rhododendron. And when humanity's sense of value is diminished, so, too, will our motivation for valuing the rest of creation be diminished.

It is indeed humanity's choice to either value creation or not to, but we need a foundation on which to base our own value before we will be motivated to grant value to, or care for, the rest of creation. Gore has removed that foundation of value by denying humanity's uniqueness.

### **WORTH MORE THAN MANY SPARROWS**

Jesus said, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; *you are worth more than many sparrows*" (Matt. 10:29-31). As Jesus indicates, there is a place for being concerned about the health of the environment, for God cares for even the sparrow. But there is also a place for knowing that we are "worth more than many sparrows," something Gore argues against.

Whereas Gore accused Bush of putting the earth in the balance and of pitting it against the economy, Gore himself has put earth in the balance and has pitted it against humanity's sense of being unique. By denying humanity's uniqueness, Gore has sacrificed not only humanity's sense of value but also the foundation for our concern for the environment, which undermines the very reason he wrote the book.

What humanity needs above all is not a better sense of connection to the earth, but to be restored in our connection to the God who says, "You are worth more than sparrows." Then we will be motivated to serve as stewards accountable to the Creator who cares for even the sparrow.