HUMANITY AS THE EXEGETE OF CREATION
WITH REFERENCE TO THE WORK OF
NATURAL SCIENTISTS

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During the 1980s, theological discussions about creation focussed on the problem of how God relates to the world. The standard for discussion was set already in 1980 by George Hendry's Theology of Nature, the fifth chapter of which mapped out six distinct "models of creation." These ranged from organic models like generation and emanation to more dualistic ones like conflict. In the middle were artistic models like fabrication and expression.1

More recently, discussion has shifted from the problem of how God relates to creation to that of how humanity relates to creation. Of course, humanity is an integral part of creation viewed as a whole. When we speak in this way of "creation" (or "nature"), however, we normally mean the vast expanses of creation that lie beyond human habitation and cultivation: the heavens, the earth, the seas, and the various (undomesticated) creatures that inhabit them. In modern terms, "creation" refers to natural ecosystems as distinct from human culture and agriculture.

Various models for humanity's role in creation are commonly adopted from Scripture, for example: dominion, conservation, stewardship, and redemption, to name just a few. In our work group on "Creation, Ecology, and Ethics," we have found ourselves reflecting on models like these as we have considered the ethical issues involved in the development of technologies and pursuit of economic growth in a world of limited resources.

The basic issue (one which we have not been able to resolve) has been the degree to which the future fulfillment of creation requires direct human intervention, either as part of its original design or as compensation for the disruptive effects of human exploitation. Is it proper, for example, to speak of the fulfillment of creation in such a way that it depends on human efforts? Is it theologically sound to speak of the "redemption of creation" and to give humanity an active
role in that redemption? In an effort to answer questions like these we have now begun to look at the underlying models we might use for the relationship between humanity and creation.

The search for adequate models is complicated by the fact that humanity relates to creation at many different levels. No one model will suit them all. In relation to our bodies, for example, Scripture recognizes the human roles of provider and physician; in relation to our homes, those of builder and steward; in relation to arable land, those of farmer and conserver. But what of our relation to the wider expanses of creation: wilderness areas, the oceans, the atmosphere, and outer space? Ancient Israelites were primarily concerned with issues of the home, the city, and the land. They related to the wider areas of creation primarily as distant admirers or as sojourners on their way from one village to another. Hence, to understand the role of humanity in this broader sense, we must think in terms of more immediate social roles that can be used as metaphors for a larger sphere than that for which they were originally intended.

Various Biblical Models: Especially Those of Priest and Scribe

One model from Scripture, of course, would be that of humanity as ruler or monarch. Monarchical images are among those most readily found in Scripture to describe the role of humanity in creation (e.g., Gen. 1:26, 28; 2:7, 19-20; Ps. 8:5-8). In the ancient world, monarchs were often viewed as symbols of hope in an otherwise chaotic world. The corresponding model of divine creation would be (approximately) George Hendry's "conflict" model, in which the emphasis was on God's struggle against the forces of darkness and chaos.3

A second possible model is humanity as the priest of creation, one that is being treated in detail by George Kehm in another paper. The underlying image here is that of creation as a temple, analogous to the tabernacle in the wilderness or the temple in Jerusalem.4 This parallel imagery was developed by the Priestly writer, for example, in Genesis 1 and Exodus 24-39.5 The corresponding models of divine creation would appear to be those of "fabrication" and "formation," in which the emphasis is on God's production of structure in accor-