

A CONSERVATIVE CONSERVATIONIST

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The Greening of Conservative

America, by John R. E. Bliese,
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x + 339 pp.

THE FIRST THING TO SAY about this fine book is that it is much better than its misleading title. Professor John R. E. Bliese does not really argue that conservatives should join the Green Party or Greenpeace. While true conservatives have always been conservationists, their concerns for the environment are not properly “biocentric” or “ecocentric,” but *theocentric*—born of the Biblical command that humans exercise stewardship over the earth. Conservatives may join “deep ecologists” and other real Greens in opposing the excesses of the anthropocentric conquest of nature, but they nevertheless part with the Greens in their insistence on the fundamental distinctions that separate man, the rest of nature, and God. As Bliese observes, there can never be even an ounce of pantheism in conservatism rightly understood. Natural piety must be for what God has given us. Still, while Bliese usually bases his judgments about scientific evidence and public policy on anti-ideological conser-

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vative *prudence*, occasionally his enthusiasm leads him to overreach: he himself becomes light Green.

Most of Bliese’s opinions concerning environmental policy, polls show, are shared by most Americans, and much of his purpose is to reconcile conservatives with mainstream American conservationist opinion. Citizens in all prosperous democracies have become increasingly concerned with the quality of life, which includes, of course, the quality of their natural surroundings. Bliese seems to have been provoked to write this book by the near-disastrous attempt to repeal environmental legislation by the new Republican Congress of 1995. “Conservatives” in Congress appeared on the verge of allowing polluters to evade their responsibilities to their fellow citizens and to future generations. The fact that Newt Gingrich’s “Contract with America” did not mention the environment was even a tactical error; it would have helped his party simply to have shown some concern.

Principled conservatives, for the most part, ought to work to replace inefficient and ineffective command and control legislation with more effective market-based incentives for reducing environmental degradation. They should provide alternatives to meddlesome and litigious liberal schemes. But Bliese goes further. He insists that conservatives sometimes ought to find the free market alternative unacceptable. Not infrequently it is still profitable for private owners—even if compelled to pay the full cost of the harm they do to others—to exploit to extinction resources that are otherwise naturally renewable. That is why there are virtually no old-growth forests left in the Pacific Northwest. Bliese rightly concludes that the authentically conservative, or prudent, position is to use the market on some occasions and to restrain it on other occasions in order to protect the good that is nature. Con-

ervationist responsibility must always trump libertarian ideology.

Bliese does, however, favor a free market in energy. If energy prices were completely unsubsidized by government, he writes, they would be much higher than they are today. The result would be a considerable reduction in fuel consumption. But Bliese also advocates major government-sponsored programs for research and development of renewable energy resources. The new technologies invented should be tested in the marketplace, but we have to admit they would not have much chance now. The reason government does not spend much for the development of alternative energy technology today is that gas prices are so low that people have no interest in it. Such research, of course, would benefit the environment in the long run. Thus higher gas prices might hurt the economy now but are in the interest of what is best for nature and for future generations.

Bliese's basic argumentative strategy is to show that existing governmental regulations, even if not market-based, have had little negative impact on the economy, while water, air, and land have become much cleaner. Most of the evidence he presents is quite persuasive. Even the Endangered Species Act, Bliese contends, ought not to be controversial. Saving the spotted owl really had no overall impact on the Pacific Northwest's timber industry. Government's protection of the infamous snail darter stopped construction on a Tennessee dam just before it was completed, but if the dam had been torn down it would have been no great economic loss. Bliese reminds us that studies had shown that the dam was itself really just a worthless pork-barrel project anyway. But he also tells us, with no apparent irony, that it turns out that the snail darter was not so endangered; the dam was finally completed and the fish still survive. The problem with the Endangered Species Act that

most impresses Bliese is that it does too little too late. A more "ecosystems" approach would produce action on behalf of species before they are on the verge of extinction. Such an approach, we must assume, would have a greater economic impact.

Bliese thinks it is obvious that all conservatives should have been on the side of the snail darter. He holds that all species should have a right to exist. But species come into being and disappear all the time, and to save them all would be an impossible mission for man. Some species flourish in our presence (such as deer and cockroaches) while others languish, no matter how careful we are. We do not have to become Darwinians to say that the preservation of all species is not nature's way. Well over ninety percent of the species that once existed are now extinct, and almost all of that devastation was not man's fault. According to Bliese, the Bible commands us to do what nature herself does not: "God told Noah to save all the animals. There is no reason to believe that any less is expected of us today. The moral of the story is again in its conclusion: the rainbow covenant is with all creatures, not just with humans." Now, it is difficult to believe that Noah literally had every single species on the ark. And the general biblical teaching is that the other animals exist for the sake of man. The prudent teaching would be that God gave man the rest of nature for his use, and that we should use that gift wisely. But there are plenty of circumstances in which it might be more prudent to let the snail darter go.

In arguing for saving species, Bliese may be blurring the distinction between a theocentric and a biocentric approach to the environment. The truth is that human beings traditionally have not had much concern for the fate of other species. Even Stone-Age man and primitive Polynesian man hunted large numbers of species to extinction. The pioneering

environmentalist Aldo Leopold wrote that "for one species to mourn the death of another is a new thing under the sun." Leopold understood the source of this emotion to be Darwinian. We are the only species who can understand the theory of evolution. It gives us "a sense of kinship with fellow-creatures; a wish to live and let live; a sense of wonder over the magnitude and duration of the biotic enterprise." We exhibit our superiority by denying our superiority.

Contrary to the dog-eat-dog side of Darwinism, we can voluntarily choose not to assert our superiority in recognition of the fact that we are not really superior at all. Maybe species-mourning, at least in moderation, is not necessarily Darwinian. Wondering about the whole of nature, and man's relatively insignificant place in the whole, also seems classical. But for Christians, the most wondrous thing in this world is man himself. God commanded man to be fruitful and multiply; no limits are placed by Him on how much or how densely the earth is to be populated. Biocentric thinkers tell man to back off in a way that the Bible does not.

In his chapter on "sustainability" Bliese does not raise the issue of the earth's human population. Given what most environmentalists say about overpopulation, the issue, for a Christian, is conspicuous by its absence. Too much of their writing uncritically accepts what science teaches about natural ecosystems as the proper guide for human choice. There are, in this view, optimal population levels for all species, including the human one. Modern or Cartesian science refused to accept any natural standard for human population. Contrary to the Malthusian predictions of biocentric scientists, modern technology has enabled us to feed billions of people easily. Modern natural science must be faulted for an inadequate view of human purposes. But surely human pur-

poses and human capacities to cultivate or alter what God has given us take precedence over any merely natural or sub-human model of perfection. For conservatives, the antidote to technological reductionism cannot be the more radical reductionism of ecocentrism.

It is still prudent to worry about the decline in biodiversity. Maybe the first reason that ought to occur to conservatives is anthropocentric. Just as the world of human beings is diminished when it becomes more homogeneous, subhuman natural variety is also desirable for the pleasure and inspiration it gives to us. With such a concern, we tend to privilege large and beautiful animals such as whales and tigers and rhinoceroses over smaller and less attractive creatures such as mosquitoes and fungi.

Bliese in any event exaggerates the current species destruction, calling it "mass extinction." There is no species holocaust going on. Bjorn Lomborg, in his most prudent book, *The Skeptical Environmentalist* (2001), says that the much more modest truth is that 0.7 percent of the existing species will disappear over the next half century. That is a much higher percentage than would disappear if man were not around at all. But what we really face, Lomborg says, "is not a catastrophe but a problem." Many of the sound proposals Bliese recommends, those that rich and free democracies are now adopting, will help deal with the problem by reducing the rate of species extinction.

The difference between Lomborg and most environmentalists is that where they see catastrophes he sees somewhat unprecedented but still manageable problems. They see the modern world itself as a catastrophe, whereas he sees that human beings are in many respects better off. Bliese's understanding of what conservatism produces, in places, a view of our current situation too close to that of the environmental extremists,

despite the generally prudent character of his policy advice.

Following Russell Kirk, the first practical principle of Bliese's conservatism is that we must not align ourselves simply with businessmen. They are usually vulgar, vain philistines who cannot see beyond profit. Conservative environmental policy must have a cultural and political dimension, and hence statesmanship must be freed from undue economic pressure. Bliese, unlike many who call themselves conservatives, does not favor the return of national forests to the states. The national government is better able to resist the business interests that would exploit those lands through logging and so forth. For similar reasons, he is usually opposed to various privatization schemes. The full range of human purposes must govern our policy, and so Bliese is far more a political than an economic or libertarian thinker. Bliese's analysis seems free from both technological and ecological reductionism, although a more balanced analysis would include a recognition of some relationship between the success of democratic capitalism and the growing ecological concern.

Bliese's final trump card is to note that conservatism is non-materialistic. Richard Weaver, for example, was a partisan of the Old South, which he portrayed as the world's last non-materialistic civilization. It follows that for conservatives the solution to the environmental problem is the saving of the human spirit through the recovery of a completely spiritual civilization. The environmental extremists also teach that modern technology must be rejected as a whole, and that some ancient understanding of man's harmony with nature must be recovered. But conservatives usually reject such a vision as dangerously utopian, and insofar as such utopianism exists in Bliese's understanding of conservatism, we must reject it too.

Conservatives surely do not really believe that the only way to sustain a habitable environment is a radical change in the way we relate to nature. If we do, then our beliefs, as Lomborg shows in great detail, are contradicted by the facts.

Weaver's achievement was to paint an image of the Old South as an alternative way of life that challenges the excesses of capitalism and libertarianism. But we cannot take the notion that the Old South was non-materialistic too literally, especially when we consider environmental questions. A primarily agricultural regime does have a different relationship with nature than a primarily industrial one. But today's environmentalist would have nothing good to say about the methods once used to grow cotton and tobacco. It may be true that the great Southerners had a proper appreciation for material progress and wealth in subordination to spiritual concerns, but they did not have the appreciation we now have for the preservation of uncultivated wilderness. The good citizens of Georgia, for example, could hardly wait to get the Cherokees off their land so that it could be put to better uses, and there are many more acres of forest in Georgia today than there were in 1860.

It is not so easy to translate Weaver's insights into contemporary environmental policy. The largely post-agricultural and post-industrial sensibility reflected in Bliese's analysis is in some ways better and in others worse for nature than was the agricultural South. Weaver's defense of the South's cultivated way of life was in any event not meant to be primarily ecological. So we must return to the virtue of prudence, which does, after all, inform most of this useful book.