

‘THE TIME OF NO ROOM’: TOWARDS A THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF CONTEMPORARY ATTEMPTS AT EARTH MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

This essay offers a theological critique of contemporary attempts to economically price the earth. It does so by drawing an analogy between pricing and the biblical act of ‘naming.’ In particular, this essay considers two forms of naming found in scripture: 1) the human person’s task of naming the animals, as described in Gen. 2:19; and 2) the work of ‘name-taking’ via census (here I focus especially on the Lukan account’s reference to the Roman imperial census). The rationality underlying each of these forms of naming is examined leading to the conclusion that the act of naming in Genesis is shaped by the desire to serve that which is named, while the act of naming in Luke is shaped by the desire to press that which is named into service. The essay concludes by arguing that the dominant regime of pricing and earth management bears a strong resemblance to the dominative logic that characterizes the Roman imperial census.

Key Words: Eco-theology; Environmental Ethics; Hermeneutics; Economics; Naming; Census; Gen. 2:19

Introduction

From an isolated hermitage in a rainstorm circa 1960, the Trappist monk and theologian Thomas Merton wrote the following:

Let me say this before rain becomes a utility that they can plan and distribute for money. By ‘they’ I mean the people who cannot understand that rain is a festival, who do not appreciate its gratuity, who think that what has no price has no value, that what cannot be sold is not real, so that the only way to make something *actual* is to place it on the market. The time will come when they will sell you even your rain. At the moment it is still free, and I am in it. I celebrate its gratuity and its meaninglessness.¹ (Merton, 1964a:9, emphasis is Merton’s)

¹ It is important to note here the manner in which I understand Merton’s use of the word “meaninglessness.” Rather than interpreting meaninglessness as an utter lack of meaning, I believe that Merton is actually referring to what might be understood as a “surplus of meaning.” In other words, the rain – and any other aspect of creation – resists being reduced to the meaning that one would assign to it. Merton is clearly reacting to the problems raised by instrumental rationality; *from this viewpoint* any aspect of something that cannot be bought or sold on the market is “meaningless” – this is the meaninglessness that Merton wishes to embrace. This distinction is crucial because in many ways it defines the parameters of my argument. If creation is utterly meaningless then humanity cannot say anything intelligible with respect to creation and the value of human rationality must be radically questioned. However, if creation is endowed with a surplus of meaning, then the human person might say something intelligible with respect to creation while simultaneously affirming that what is said is always fractional at best.

Merton's reflection gains even greater poignancy in light of recent remarks from Peter Spillet, a senior executive for the English firm Thames Water. In an interview in 2002, Spillet asserted, without a hint of irony, that "...people do not understand the value of water... they expect it to fall from the sky and not cost anything" (quoted in Goldman, 2005:242-243).

It would thus appear that Merton's prediction has been realized. Indeed, Spillet's rather audacious and – to be frank – disturbing statement exemplifies a growing view among economists that the ideal way to regulate the interactions between the economy and the ecological processes of the earth is to privatize every facet of the earth and allow the market to govern the relationship between these two 'households.'²

The aim of this article is to move toward a theological evaluation of this contemporary regime of earth management. In order to carry out this task, I will turn to scripture. Operating under the hypothesis that the economic pricing of the earth might be understood as a form of 'naming,' I will examine two forms of naming described in the Bible and consider whether one of these forms might function as a proper analogue for current attempts at managing the earth.

The first form of naming that I will consider is found in the Yahwist's (J) account of creation, where God presents the animals to the human person so that the person might name them (Gen 2:19).³ The second, and perhaps less obvious, form of naming is that of enrollment via census. With respect to this second form, I will focus especially on Luke's reference to the Roman imperial census in the birth narrative of Jesus (Lk 2:1). There Luke tells his audience that 'the whole world' is being enrolled by Rome.

For purposes of clarity I will distinguish between these two forms referring to the act of naming in the Genesis account as 'name-giving,' and the act of naming secured through the census as 'name-taking.' After exploring the connotations of each of these biblical forms of naming, including the intention and logic that characterizes each of them, I will conclude with a brief consideration of how the dominant regime of earth management may be understood in relationship to these two forms. I will begin my analysis by turning to the Yahwist account of creation in Genesis.

'Name-Giving' in Genesis 2:19

In the Yahwist account, God gives the human person the task of naming the non-human creatures that God has made. As the verse from Genesis reads: "So the LORD God formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds of the air, and he brought them to the man to see what he would call them; whatever the man called each living creature was then its name" (Gen. 2:19). One common interpretation of this passage holds that God, in giving humanity power to name non-human creation, confers upon the human person a dominative power over the rest of creation (e.g. Trible, 1978). However, this interpretation has been criticized heavily by scholars attempting ecological readings of scripture and more traditional scripture scholars alike (e.g. Ramsey, 1988; Brett, 2000). An example of the latter is found in the classic work on Genesis by Claus Westermann, who finds that rather than underwriting the domination of the earth by humanity, the narrative first places a limit on the autonomy of the human person. As Westermann writes, "The creator has formed the animals; the man can do nothing about this, but must accept them as God presents them to

² Here I am of course referring to the root of both "ecology" and "economics," the Greek *oikos* meaning "household." For a critical examination of the manner in which market ideology is being brought to bear upon the earth, see Söderbaum, 2000.

³ All biblical quotations conform to the New American Bible revised edition.

him" (Westermann, 1984:228). Westermann then turns to consider the implications of 'naming' directly, noting: "The exercise of dominion does not begin with the use or exploitation of the animals for human ends. The meaning is not, as most interpreters think, that the man acquires power over the animals by naming them ... But rather that the man gives the animals their names and thereby puts them into a place in his world" (Westermann, 1984:228). Westermann concludes stating that the practice of naming animals is "...basically a rational procedure. Animals simply as creatures have no name. It is only the giving of the name that creates the world of humankind" (Westermann, 1984:228, emphasis is mine). Here, then, one discerns in its most basic form how the act of naming can be understood as analogous to attempts at pricing the earth. Both are intended as rational acts aiming to incorporate that which is not human into the human world. In the case of economic pricing the aim is more specific: it aims to incorporate the ecological and material reality of the earth into a human economy.

However, it is also at this point that Westermann's argument runs into a difficulty. Although, he is clear in affirming that the naming of creation is not intended to connote the domination of non-human creation by humanity, his description of naming as a 'rational procedure' renders his initial affirmation problematic. The reason for this – as various post-modern and post-colonial discourses have shown – is that rationality is far from a uni-dimensional or objective concept. Rather, rationality is always socially constructed and infused with claims of power; indeed, power that can be used to sanction various forms of domination (e.g. Foucault, 1984; Grenz, 1996).⁴ Here I do not wish to suggest, as some of the more radical deconstructivists would, that appeals to reason should be jettisoned. Rather, my intent is to acknowledge the ambiguity that is now associated with the concept. Thus, it is necessary to explore the Yahwist's worldview more deeply in order to discern what type of rationality may be operative in the act of naming the animals (this will allow me to consider, later, whether the logic of name-giving in Genesis is congruent with the logic of pricing as defined by the regnant neo-classical economic ideology).

Theodore Hiebert has written extensively on the Yahwist account and observes that biblical interpretation – including ecologically-minded biblical interpretation – has consistently allowed the first creation story in Genesis, the Priestly (P) account, to subsume the worldview embedded within the Yahwist narrative (Hiebert, 2008:31).⁵ For Christian ecological theology this is a particularly lamentable fact, since, as Hiebert argues, the Yahwist account of creation offers a much more ecologically egalitarian view of the relationship between the human person and non-human creation than the Priestly account (the latter depicts the human as existing atop a hierarchically ordered creation) (Hiebert, 2000:138).

As it is frequently pointed out, the ecological egalitarianism of the Yahwist is witnessed to in J's description of the manner in which God creates the human person. This account

⁴ Stanley Grenz observes that for Foucault, "human knowledge does not merely allow us to exercise power over nature as Bacon had suggested; more significantly, knowledge is violence. The act of knowing, says Foucault, is always an act of violence" (Grenz, 1996:133).

⁵ I must note here that in recent years the standard source delineation of Genesis has been called into question, it appears that the standard paradigm of attributing of discrete passages of Genesis to the "Yahwist," "Elohist," "Priestly," and "Deuteronomist" is on the verge of collapse. Nevertheless, a new paradigm has yet to emerge. Thus, the traditional paradigm still presents itself as the best framework for a systematic theologian to engage with. With regard to this essay, it should be observed that despite the manner in which I strongly contrast "J" and "P" in this section, my argument is not dependent upon this strict source delineation. Rather, my argument is tied most closely to the differing conceptions of the human vocation presented in the first two chapters of Genesis which remain intact, regardless of future developments in the source analysis of the Pentateuch.

points to the close relationship between the human person and the earth, recording that God fashions the human person out of the earth; the closeness of this relationship is then amplified by the etymological connection made between earth and the human person ('ādāmā and 'ādām). Furthermore, the Yahwist extends the intimate connection between the earth and the human person to include the animals of the earth; all of whom, J tells his readers, are fashioned from the same soil out of which the human person was formed.⁶

There is also a geographical intimacy existing between the human person and the rest of creation. Not only is the human person comprised of the same material as non-human creation, the person also lives in direct contact with the creatures that God brings to the person to name. Hiebert points to the importance of this geographical intimacy, noting that the Yahwist "does not view the world of nature in a general, universal, or abstract sense. Rather, J writes about the natural world in terms of a precise, distinctive environment" (Hiebert, 2008:62).

The Yahwist's affirmation of the material and geographical intimacy shared by the human, the earth, and other creatures suggests that the human person is not intended to exist over and against non-human creation but rather that the person is meant to live as kin to the broader earth community (Baukham, 2010:20-21).⁷ The ethos of the kinship model with which J views the relationship between non-human creation and the human – as well as the difference between the worldviews of the Priestly and Yahwist accounts – is perhaps most dramatically reflected in the distinct vocations that P and J assign to the human person within their narratives. According to the Priestly account, the human person is called to have dominion (*rādā*) and subdue (*kābaš*) the earth (Gen. 1:26, 28). Although contemporary interpretations of these terms frequently attempt to soften their meaning by suggesting that they be understood in line with the notion of stewardship,⁸ Hiebert points out that the terms are used elsewhere in scripture to refer respectively to military conquest and the forced conscription into slavery and rape (Hiebert, 2000:136-137). The terms, therefore, resist uncritical mollification. Instead, as Hiebert argues, they are representative of the hierachal worldview of P (Hiebert, 2000:136-137).

The Yahwist's conception of the human vocation is radically different from that of the Priestly account. According to J, humanity is called "to cultivate and care for creation" (Gen. 2:15). As Hiebert points out, the verb commonly translated 'to cultivate' ('ābad) also can be translated 'to serve.' Rather than ruling over creation, the human person, according to the Yahwist, is called to adopt the posture of a servant. Thus, the task of naming must be governed by the more fundamental vocation of serving creation.

When name-giving is understood in these terms, one can discern at least two dimensions to the act: limitation and humility. The first dimension is developed by Joseph Blenkinsopp, who argues that naming may best be understood as an act of self-conscious limitation on the part of the human – by naming the animals, the person acknowledges the animals both as 'other' and as 'thou' and therefore implicitly sets a *limitation* on how he

⁶ Hiebert argues against a tradition of interpretation that would underscore the difference between human beings and creation; he writes: "The inherent connection between human life and the earth in particular is made by J with special emphasis: the first human shares in his name ... the name of the soil ... and human death is described as a return to the soil. The breath of life ... that God breathes into this first human to bring him to life does not give him a soul or spiritual being different from other animate beings. The breath 'ādām receives from God is the physical breath upon which all animate life depends (7:22)," (Hiebert, 2008, 63).

⁷ For a pneumatologically grounded consideration of kinship see Elizabeth Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1993).

⁸ Among others, H Paul Santmire argues that the term "stewardship" is itself problematic on several fronts (Santmire:2010).

might interact with non-human creation (Blenkinsopp, 1997:38-54). Secondly, since the human person is called by God to name the animals in the presence of God, the narrative implies that the human person must undertake this task with a dimension of humility: even in the act of naming the animals, the human person is to remember that (s)he is not God. Thus, the name that the person gives is always partial, always somewhat obscured – it is a label that can never fully capture the truth of that which is named.

In sum, if, as Westermann has asserted, naming can be thought of as a rational procedure, then one finds several characteristics informing the rationality operative in the act of name-giving in Genesis. First, it is a logic informed by the view that the human person exists as kin to non-human creation. Second, it arises out of intimate relationship and is fundamentally aimed at serving the whole community (not just the interests of the human person). Third, because this form of reason is aimed at serving the community, it is oriented to setting limits upon human action and is also humbly aware of its own limited understanding regarding that which it named.

The rationality underlying the act of name-giving described in the Yahwist narrative, then, bears a striking affinity to what Val Plumwood describes as ‘ecological rationality’ (Plumwood, 1998-99). Consistent with J’s ethos of service to the earth’s community that governs the task of name-giving, Plumwood describes ecological rationality as fundamentally oriented toward care for the integrity of “the life-supporting capability of ecosystems” (Plumwood, 1998-1999:188). This orientation, thus, necessarily implies an intentional self-limitation on the part of human persons – it recognizes that eco-systems have boundaries that cannot be transgressed without inciting their collapse.⁹

Moreover, according to Plumwood, ecological rationality is a self-critical rationality that recognizes the incompleteness of its knowledge as well as its own propensity for bias and error and therefore opens itself to a continuous process of self-reflective scrutiny as a means of correction (Plumwood, 1998-99:188-189). The self-critical character of ecological rationality finds its scriptural correlate in the Yahwist’s subtle affirmation that the human person is to remember that she is not God and is thus subject to the same limitations that ecological rationality affirms.

One aspect of the self-critical nature of ecological rationality is its emphasis on what Plumwood describes as ‘remoteness reduction’ (Plumwood, 1998-99:193). Recognizing the complexity of both the earth’s ecological processes as well as the equally complex interactions between these processes and those of human economies, ecological rationality affirms the need for feedback from a multitude of geographical and socio-economic spaces. In other words, the whole of the community must be taken into account. Ecological rationality’s affirmation of the need to reduce both geographical and socio-economic barriers in its evaluation of the earth is consonant with the egalitarian view of the Yahwist, as well as J’s affirmation that material and geographical intimacy are proper to the human person’s relationship to the earth’s community. In view of these points, one may build upon Westermann’s position that the naming of the animals is an exercise in rationality by underscoring the *eco-rational* nature of the act of name-giving.

Before returning to contemplate the relationship between the ecological rationality that characterizes the act of name-giving and the rationality underlying contemporary efforts at earth management, I will now move to consider a second form of naming found in scripture – that of name-taking through the imposition of a census.

⁹ For an overview of the nine ecological boundaries that have either been transgressed or are at the point of being transgressed, see JB Foster, *et al*, 2010: see esp. 13-24.

'Name-Taking' in Luke 2:1

The author of Luke's gospel references the form of name-taking in his narration of the birth of Jesus. In this narrative, Luke tells his readers that Joseph and Mary must return to Bethlehem because Caesar has called for a census in order that "the whole world might be enrolled" (Lk 2:1) – that is, that the whole world might be named by the Roman Empire. In order to properly evaluate the naming enacted through the Roman census, as well as the rationality that informs this process of naming, one must consider the politics of Luke's gospel.

Luke has often been read as an *apologia* for imperial rule (for a critical evaluation of this position, see Walton, 2002). This line of interpretation holds that one of the driving forces behind Luke's gospel – which, of the four gospels, most explicitly places its narrative within the context of the Roman Empire – is Luke's desire to demonstrate to Rome that the Christian faith was amenable to, and even supportive of, Roman rule. By extension, Luke's gospel has also been interpreted as exhorting Christians to uphold Roman rule and power. According to these interpretations, Luke refers to the Roman census in order to underscore Mary and Joseph's obedience to Roman law. Mary and Joseph submissively return to Joseph's place of birth so that they might be accounted for by the imperial state; they do not resist the Roman dictate as perhaps an insurrectionary Zealot may.

In recent years, interpretations portraying Luke's view of the relationship between the Christian faith and the empire as irenic have been called into question. As Steve Walton points out, there is at the very least a great deal of ambivalence regarding the manner in which Luke portrays the Roman Empire. For example, whereas Luke is often read as absolving Pilate of blame for the crucifixion of Jesus, Walton points out that the verb 'to give over' – describing Pilate's handing over of Jesus to the high priests – is used twenty times by Luke to connote specifically an act of cooperating in persecution (Walton, 2002). Therefore, Rome – at minimum – is understood as abetting in the crucifixion of Jesus.

More tellingly, conciliatory readings of the Lukan account also fail to note that there are strikingly subversive implications to the language that Luke uses to describe Jesus. To affirm Jesus as 'Lord,' or 'Son of God' – as Luke does – applied to Jesus titles that in the Roman context were reserved solely for Caesar. The unstated implication here is that Caesar is not the true Son of God (e.g. Hertig, 2004). This suggests a much more iconoclastic bent to Luke's gospel.

In accord with this suggestion, Raymond Pickett argues that it is best to understand Luke's gospel account as a counter-narrative in which Luke "sets out an alternative vision of life that challenged the foundational values and structures of Greco-Roman society" (Pickett, 2009; see also, Burrus, 2009; and Ringe, 1995). This alternative vision of life is perhaps most pronounced in Luke's emphasis on economic justice and the liberation of the material poor (e.g. Krüger, 2008; Ringe, 2002). The Lukan economic vision, though it is never stated explicitly, would have been understood as a counter to the complex hierarchical Roman patronage system – a system which ensured the massive economic disparity, in terms of both degree and scale, to which Luke is so deeply opposed.¹⁰

Adopting a hermeneutic of counter-narrative in reading the Lukan gospel account pushes one towards a dramatically different interpretation of Luke's reference to the Roman census than the interpretation discussed above. Rather than understanding Luke's inclusion of the imperial census as a means of affirming Christian submissiveness to Roman rule, a

¹⁰ For a helpful overview of the Roman patronage system see, Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, 2000: see esp. 96-101.

counter-narrative reading of this passage is one that is strongly – albeit slyly – subversive in its appraisal of Rome.¹¹ As those in Luke's audience who were familiar with the Hebrew bible would likely have been aware, 'census-taking' in scripture is a politically and theologically charged action – an act that had been revealed to be at cross purposes to the will of God. This view of the census is perhaps most strongly captured in Second Samuel, where David angers God by ordering a census of Israel (II Sam 24:1-17). As Walter Brueggemann comments on the passage from Samuel, "The census ordered by David ... is a sin. The census serves primarily as a preliminary act for the military draft and for taxes (cf. I Kings 4:7-19, 27-28). The census thus serves to enhance royal, bureaucratic, oppressive power" (Brueggemann, 1990:351-352). Brueggemann continues his analysis of the census, writing:

the census bespeaks not only high organization, it conjures swift runners, powerful horses, fearful royal agents invading old villages and settled relations (vv. 4-8) The census is the long, ruthless arm of the military state intruding into tribal and village life ... It is not a benign act of counting but an act of bureaucratic terrorism. In the end, the narrative is explicit. The purpose is to count potential soldiers, 'valiant men' (v.9). The purpose is to mobilize military power. (Brueggemann, 1990:352)

In view of II Samuel, Luke's inclusion of the census in the birth narrative of Jesus is intended to suggest that the edifices of Roman rule were built upon the threat and actualization of violent domination through military power, as well as the unjust amassing of wealth through systems of taxation. If Luke acknowledges that Mary and Joseph submit to the census, he also implies that this submission is coerced under the threat of violence and that the imposition of the census was itself sinful. The imposition of the census was aimed at both geographically expanding its sphere of influence and deepening the degree to which Rome could economically exploit those that it 'named.'

In view of this interpretation of the imperial census, it is possible to identify several differences between the census and the act of name-giving found in Genesis 2:19. First, unlike name-giving, which is fundamentally characterized by the call to serve, the name-taking of the census is distinguished by the aim of pressing into service that which is named – the whole world was being conscripted to serve Rome. In accord with its aim of conscription, and in contrast to the egalitarian nature of the Yahwist's earth community, the name-taking of the census properly belongs to an oppressive-hierarchical social structure (here one can recall the wealth disparity intrinsic to the Roman patronage system that Luke counters with the economic vision of God's reign). Second, in opposition to the act of name-giving which takes place within the context of an intimate community – and, one might add, remained confined to the location of that intimate community – Rome's act of name-taking is shaped by the desire for geographical expansion: Rome's naming will span the entirety of the earth. Thus, one can observe that the act of name-taking embraces the spatial and socio-economic 'remoteness' that name-giving resists. The remoteness that characterizes Rome's imperial gaze extending to the whole world reduces the world to an instrument to serve Rome's purposes. Third, one can note that the self-critical orientation of name-giving, implied by the affirmation that the human person is not God, is absent from the act of name-taking. Not only does the name-taking of the census not occur before God,

¹¹ The case for reading Luke as a counter-narrative gains support from James Scott's insightful analysis of the discreet manners in which oppressed people resist their oppressors. Scott's study finds that rather than overtly "speaking truth to power," the oppressed frequently opt for maintaining an irenic public transcript as a means to self-preservation while simultaneously articulating a subversive "hidden transcript" through an idiom indecipherable to the oppressors. Scott's analysis, in my view, informs us as precisely how Luke's reference to the Roman census should be interpreted. See James Scott, 1990.

it is authorized by Caesar, the one whom the empire confesses as a god. Thus, far from being self-critical, the act of name-taking is hubristic, believing its appraisal to be authoritative. Thus, the rationality characterizing the census's imperial name-taking is an instrumental form of reason, aimed at securing domination over the world, and assured of its own validity. As such, this rationality exists in diametric opposition to the ecological rationality expressed by the act of name-giving as described by the Yahwist.¹²

The Rationality Underlying Environmental Management

How does the form of naming intrinsic to the contemporary attempts of earth management compare to the two forms of naming that I have just considered from within the biblical accounts? To answer this question, it is worth recalling that the act of name-giving is fundamentally geared toward the service of the community, whereas name-taking aims at conscripting the community into the service of the ruling power. In view of this basic difference, one can turn to an important insight offered by the sociologist Leslie Sklair into how one might best interpret the ascendant form of economic valuation and environmental management. Sklair cites a key passage from Herman Daly and John Cobb Jr.'s landmark work in the field of ecological economics, *For the Common Good* (Daly and Cobb, 1994). There Daly and Cobb, having already raised a distinction between *oikonomia* – “the science or art of efficiently producing, distributing, and maintaining concrete use values for the household and community over the long run” – and *chrematisitics* – “the art of maximizing the accumulation by individuals of abstract exchange value in the form of money in the short run” – conclude: “As the concept of sustainable development is further defined, we believe it will begin to resemble our outline of an economics of community” (Daly and Cobb, 1994:371). Commenting on Daly and Cobb's conclusion, Sklair notes that in the years that have followed the publication of *For the Common Good*, ‘sustainable development became a major industry while their economics of community sank almost without trace’ (Sklair, 2001:200).

The decoupling of the economics of sustainability from the economics of community left the former radically underdetermined and vulnerable to redefinition (Sklair, 2001:200). Gilbert Rist, a leading scholar in development studies, shows that as the concept of sustainable development gained increasing social and political prominence in the 1990s, the term became redefined by powerful corporate and political factions, in a matter that subordinated sustainability to development. Thus, Rist concludes, with respect to the current logic underlying sustainable development: “The thing that is meant to be sustained is ‘development,’ not the tolerance capacity of the ecosystem or of human societies” (Rist, 2008:194).

Sustainability was decoupled from the notion of service to the community and then subordinated to the logic of growth. In short, Daly and Cobb's prediction, thus far, has proven false; it is the logic of chrematisitics and not oikonomia that determines the concept of sustainable development. This, then, suggests that the ascendant regime of pricing and earth management is aimed at enrolling the earth into the service of the economy rather than constructing an economy aimed at serving the health of the earth community. This suspicion gains support from Daly's observation regarding the absence of reference to economic scale in macro-economic theorization (Daly, 1996: Ch. 2). The absence of scale

¹² Asserting that the two forms of naming exist in diametrical opposition to one another is not a convenient contrivance on my part. As Mark G Brett argues the redactor of Genesis intentionally placed the P and J accounts in succession so as to allow the egalitarian ideology of J to subvert the royal ideology P, a royal ideology that sanctioned census taking; see Brett, 2000:84-86.

corroborates the notion that oikonomia has been subordinated to chrematistics because, as Daly points out, “until the surface of the earth begins to grow at a rate equal to the rate of interest,” unlimited growth will prove to be unsustainable (Daly, 1996:60). In other words, refusing to take into account scale helps to sanction the maximization of short-term profit at the expense of sustained ecological health.

Further evidence that the dominant model of pricing and earth management is more analogous to the practice of name-taking than name-giving is found in Plumwood’s observation that the “dominant global order … may be close to maximizing ecological remoteness” (Plumwood, 1998-99:198-199). As noted above, Plumwood asserts that this remoteness occurs both on the spatial level, with respect to the geographical size of the economy and on the social level in terms of disparities of income and political agency. With respect to the social level, these disparities suppress the voices of those who are most likely to suffer the immediate effects of ecological degradation, thus rendering ‘remote’ the voices that could speak most clearly to the depth of the reality of ecological and social impoverishment. This, then, fits with the name-taking model of the census, which as I have shown, is characterized by a hierarchical socio-economic system and an enormous spatial scale.

Finally, Wolfgang Sachs has argued that the academic disciplines of economics and ecology are currently being fused in a manner that allows the champions of this union to present their economic models for environmental management as objective (Sachs:2010). Summarizing the fears of Sachs, David Harvey notes that such scientific knowledge “can be appropriated by multinational corporations to legitimize a global grab to manage all of the world’s resources. Indeed, it is not impossible to imagine a world in which big industry … big governments (including the World Bank) and establishment, high-tech big science can get to dominate the world even more than they currently do in the name of ‘sustainability,’ ecological modernization and appropriate global management of the supposedly fragile health of planet earth” (Harvey, 1996:382). In other words, the contemporary production and appropriation of environmental knowledge under the auspices of sustainability allows for the possibility of the entire world being enrolled to a degree that not even the Roman Empire could have dreamt possible. Furthermore, this enrollment resists critical interrogation because it is purportedly sanctioned by objective scientific truths.

In short, all of these factors point to an acute incongruence between the rationality underlying the act of name-giving in Genesis and the contemporary attempts at pricing and managing the earth.¹³ Instead, it appears that these contemporary attempts are more properly analogous to the form of name-taking found in the imposition of the imperial census referenced in Luke – a form of naming that, as I have already suggested, runs counter to the Reign of God as it was proclaimed, inaugurated, and embodied by Jesus.

Conclusion: The Time of No Room

I began this article with a citation from the beginning of Merton’s collection of essays *Raids on the Unspeakable*. I would like to close now by turning to a second essay of Merton’s in that same collection. In “The Time of the End is the Time of No Room” – which is perhaps Merton’s most haunting piece of writing – the Trappist continues to reflect on the manner in which the ascendancy of instrumental reason threatens the collective life of humanity (Merton 1964b). At the center of Merton’s reflection is the Lukan narrative of the birth of Jesus that I have just considered. Merton’s interpretation of

¹³ It is important to be clear here that this judgment does not necessarily suggest that attempts at economic pricing should be discarded. Rather, it holds that the dominant model of pricing must be, at minimum, drastically modified. On this point see H Diefenbacher, 2011.

the birth narrative follows a counter-narrative reading, emphasizing the threat of imperial domination that the census portended.

Merton then turns to the scene of the birth of Christ and considers the fact that there was no room in the inn for Christ. For Merton, it is entirely fitting that at the time when the whole world was to be enrolled in the service of empire – and through that enrollment reduced to measurable data of financial and military worth – there would be no room left for the ‘Great Joy’ – no room left for ‘the human one’ to exist.

In this contribution I have argued that in the contemporary context, humanity is threatening to press the whole world into the service of an economy that does not respect the boundaries or the integrity of the ecological processes of the earth. As such, this economy threatens to radically diminish the ecological community in which the Yahwist understands the human person to exist precisely as human. In view of this, Christian theology can affirm the need to construct a contemporary counter-narrative, one that more closely conforms to the logic of name-giving and is understood as an integral dimension of the in-breaking of God’s reign, even in a time when it appears that there is no room for the New Adam to arrive.

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