

Response to Alex Williams

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I would like to thank Alex Williams for his interest in my articles and the opportunity his critique has provided to clarify my position. I was somewhat surprised at the amount of disagreement Williams has with the points raised in my papers. I received personal notes of thanks and encouragement from a number of people, and Williams' response was the only negative one I have so far received. Nevertheless, he raises a number of important issues that do need further explanation and clarification.

The kingdom of God and the image of God

Williams quotes from p. 88 of part 1 of my paper in reference to the kingdom of God ruling over his people in the material universe, and asserts: "Although almost universally believed, this understanding is false." However, Williams fails to mention that the statement he objects to was actually made by Dr Graeme Goldsworthy—arguably the premier evangelical biblical theologian in the world today. Williams contends that 'image' denotes a visual representation such as a painting, sculpture, or photograph, and therefore, "being made in the image of God means that we look like God". But this verse is clearly not talking about physical appearance—it concerns those elements of God's character and nature that human beings have in common with Him because He created us. Williams is also inconsistent on this point. He later quotes John 1:18, "No one has ever seen God, but the only-begotten God [Jesus] who is at the Father's side has made Him known." But Williams has just claimed we look like God, so would that not suggest that God can be known by looking at human beings because we are made in God's image and likeness i.e. 'we look like God'?

Williams argues that all the visions and manifestations of God in Scripture portray Him as having human-like characteristics and human-sized dimensions. However, this is simply not true. While divine anthropomorphisms are common in Scripture they do not cover all the instances of God revealing Himself. There are several non-human manifestations of God, e.g. a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire (Exod 13:21), His appearance before Moses (Exod 33:19–23), the Shekinah glory (Exod 40:34–38; Ezek 43:2, 4), and the dove descending upon Christ at His baptism (Matt 3:16).

Thinking rightly about the nature of God

According to Williams, God is "not a cosmic giant that is bigger than the universe, but a father-figure person that we can relate to." By describing God as a mere father-figure, Williams appears to have fallen for the error that A.W. Tozer warned of years ago—of re-creating God in our own image. In this case, Williams is picturing God as being just like an earthly father who 'we can relate to'. Tozer wrote:

"I believe there is scarcely an error in doctrine or a failure in applying Christian ethics that cannot be traced finally to imperfect and ignoble thoughts about God. It is my opinion that the Christian conception of God ... is so decadent as to be utterly beneath the dignity of the Most High God and actually to constitute for professed believers something amounting to a moral calamity. Among the sins to which the human heart is prone, hardly any other is more hateful to God than idolatry, for idolatry is at bottom a libel on His character. The idolatrous heart assumes that God is other than He is—in itself a monstrous sin—and substitutes for the true God one made after its own likeness. Always this God will conform to the image of the one who created it and will be base or pure, cruel or kind, according to the moral state of the mind from which it emerges. Let us beware lest we in our pride accept the erroneous notion that idolatry consists only in kneeling before visible objects of adoration, and that civilised peoples are therefore free from it. The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him. It begins in the mind and may be present where no overt act of worship has taken place ... Wrong ideas about God are not only the fountain from which the polluted waters of idolatry flow; they are themselves idolatrous. The idolater simply imagines things about God and acts as if they were true. The heaviest obligation lying upon the Christian church today is to purify and elevate her concept of God until it is once more worthy of Him—and of her. In all her prayers and labours this should have first place. We do the greatest service to the next generation of Christians by passing on to them undimmed and undiminished that noble concept of God which we received from our Hebrew and Christian fathers of generations past. This will prove of greater value to them than anything that art or science can devise."¹

Yes, God is portrayed as a loving, guiding and disciplining father, but He is also portrayed as the King of Kings, a Lord and Master, a timeless, transcendent spiritual being and a myriad of other descriptions.

Williams claims we "cannot have a father-like relationship with a God who is bigger than the universe", but describing God as being "bigger than the universe" indicates deep theological confusion. God is constrained by neither time nor space. God is a spiritual transcendent being. Furthermore, Williams claims that "we have never had a proper understanding of man or of God's kingdom

because all our experience is of fallen man.” However, the proper understanding is clearly and repeatedly spelled out in the Bible—in particular in Christ’s ministry: “The kingdom of God is like ...”, etc.

The divinity and kingship of Christ

Surprisingly, Williams claims Jesus “lived, died and rose again as a man, not as God”. This is nothing short of rank heresy! Authentic, historic, orthodox Christian theology holds that Jesus was both God and Man.² Moreover, he claims the kingdom of God “is not God ruling over us as His subjects; it is us raised up in Christ ruling with Him over His creation” and accuses me of having a view of man that is much too low. But Williams appears to be placing God and man on the same level. We will rule over the new creation but Christ will still rule over us. Christ alone is identified as King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Rev 17:14; 19:16). Williams’ view of God is much too low!

In response to my claim that viewing the incarnate Christ as part of creation is theological heresy, Williams asserts that the doctrine of the Trinity sorts this problem out because it affirms that Jesus was both “fully man (part of creation) and fully God (begotten, not made)”. Again, Williams is inconsistent because he had previously stated that Jesus lived, died and rose again as a man not as God! In any case, Williams is confusing concepts here. The doctrine of Trinity is not the issue here. We are talking purely about the second person of the Trinity (the Son). He pre-existed creation. Just because He took the form of a human being does not mean He was part of creation. Indeed, this was not the first time He had taken the form of a human being (cf. Genesis 18). As the *Nicene Creed* (AD 325) put it, “one lord, Jesus Christ, the son of God, begotten from the father, only-begotten, that is from the being of the father, God from God, light from light, true God from True God, begotten not made, one in being with the father.”

Human population growth

Williams objects to my claims that human population growth has not been detrimental to the flourishing of other creatures and that extinction in most cases has been due to over-hunting rather than the general expansion of human civilisation. He cites the destruction of plant species in Australia through overgrazing, etc. in support. However, I had in mind animal species not plant species. Plant species may well have been destroyed by overgrazing and land clearing but plants are much easier to preserve and reintroduce than animal species, e.g. Wollemi Pine.

Human beings as intelligent creative producers

Williams apparently does not accept my claim that “the biblical worldview sees people as principally intelligent, well-meaning, creative producers and stewards” and claims that this is actually “a romanticized view no different to the secular ‘renaissance man’ who today has become

‘supermarket man’.” But Williams fails to quote the second half of my sentence: the reason we are principally intelligent, well-meaning, creative producers and stewards is because God created us that way! In other words, we are intelligent, well-meaning, and creative producers because that is the nature of God and we are made in His image. Yes, all human beings are sinful but we still bear the image of God, albeit a distorted one.

According to Williams, tribal people usually have a far better understanding of the importance of the land and its ‘lesser’ inhabitants than does ‘supermarket man’. This is doubtful. For example, Australia’s Aboriginals are believed to have hunted the continent’s megafauna to extinction³ and continue to hunt the dugong (sea cow) to near extinction.⁴ Moreover, their deliberate burning of bushland also contributed significantly to megafauna extinction.³ Therefore, it is dishonest to claim that ‘tribal man’ is somehow more in tune with his environment than lazy, self-centred and ignorant ‘supermarket man’ who simply “gets everything he needs out of a plastic packet”. Indeed, as I pointed out in part 2, people in modern developed countries (i.e. supermarket men) cause far less pollution and produce far less garbage than people in 3rd world or undeveloped nations, and this excessive pollution has had devastating effects on water ways. Consider, for example, the state of the Ganges river in India.

Environmentalism/conservationism as ideologies

Williams strongly objects to my repeated use of the terms ‘environmentalists’ and ‘conservationists’ to describe the enemy of the biblical worldview. It should be noted, however, that my references to environmentalists and conservationists are intended to refer to those who value the existence and needs of animals and plants above the existence and needs of human beings who bear the image of God. I wholly reject any notion that animals and plants are on the same level or—even worse—superior to, human beings, and I sincerely hope there are other readers of a similar persuasion. I would also point out that the use of emotive language such as ‘the enemy’ are Williams’ words not mine. I consider those people who place the existence and needs of plants and animals above the existence and needs of human beings as holding unbiblical views, not as enemies. Furthermore, just because I reject environmentalism and conservationism as being unbiblical, does not mean that I reject the need to care for and protect the environment, or the need to protect and conserve endangered species. This is part of our biblical mandate as God’s stewards. However, such protection should never be at the expense of human needs or cause—directly or indirectly—human suffering. In other words, environmentalism and conservationism as ideologies should be rejected as unbiblical.

It should also be noted that my references to ‘human needs’ refer to genuine and fundamental human needs such as food, shelter and clothing. I am not referring to mere human desires and indulgences.

Exploitation of natural resources

Regarding the use of natural resources, Williams points out that it is obvious that there are limited resources on Earth and asserts that they are being used unsustainably. But as I stated in my paper, such concerns have been around since at least the time of Tertullian. Moreover, there is simply no evidence for the claim that resources are being used unsustainably. If that was the case then such resources would become less and less abundant and their market price would reflect the declining supply. Yet this has not occurred. Supply of all significant natural resources has in fact increased not decreased. Consequently, prices (except for wood) have come down.

Concerning the meaning of Genesis 3:19, Williams states that “God was not there commissioning man to exploit nature for his own purposes—He was stating that the food which Adam was given freely before the Fall would now have to be extracted from cursed ground by laborious toil.” I agree. Adam would now have to work/compel/exploit the ground to make it produce sufficient food to meet his needs, i.e. for his own purposes.

IVF technology

Regarding the use of IVF technology to treat infertility, Williams argues that it “allows infertile couples to pass on their genetic defects to their descendants” and posits that promoting adoption and fostering is a more godly approach. While adoption and fostering should be promoted, these are often not available to those without significant financial resources. Given that western society now prefers to murder unwanted babies, prospective adopters must now source children from overseas at great cost. In any case, Williams incorrectly ascribes infertility to purely genetic defects, when this is not always the case. It could be due to other reasons including diet, effects of prior illness, exposure to harmful radiation, chemicals or drugs, or physical injury. In any case, many genetic defects do not affect fertility. In fact, everyone has genetic defects of one sort or another.

Environmentalists/conservationists and justice, mercy and compassion

Williams appears indignant at my claim that environmentalists and conservationists have no conception of the role of human intelligence in the creation of economically useable resources, and points out that many such people are “well educated and are often specialists with international reputations”. However, I never claimed these people were unintelligent and uneducated. As Williams rightly notes, they are often specialists in their fields, but being an expert or specialist in botany or microbiology does not mean or imply a detailed understanding of markets, economics, commerce and industrial development.

Williams also suggests that I have entirely overlooked obligations of justice, mercy, compassion and service—especially in respect to the way the wealthy treat the poor. I certainly agree that only the rich can afford to develop

existing natural resources and create new ones. However, I do not agree that they have an obligation “to share their wealth with the poor”. Rather, they have an obligation to share their knowledge with the poor and assist them to create their own wealth in a clean, efficient and sustainable way. As the saying goes, “Give a man a fish and he’ll eat for a day. Teach him to fish, and he’ll never go hungry again.” I did not directly discuss issues of justice, mercy, compassion and service because these were not directly relevant to the topic of creation, preservation and dominion. For my views on these matters, I suggest Williams read my papers on biblical justice and biblical economics which may be viewed and downloaded from my website.⁵

Williams also asks:

“Where is the prophetic call to provide justice for those dispossessed and disadvantaged by development, for the rich to share what they have with the poor, the warning that the rich will find it impossible to enter the kingdom of God, and the call to serve rather than exploit?”

However, he is making a number of unsubstantiated claims and baseless assumptions. Development per se does not result in dispossession and disadvantage.⁶ Many rich do indeed share what they have with the poor—at least the rich on the conservative side of the political spectrum.⁷ The rich will certainly find it hard to enter the kingdom of heaven but not impossible (e.g. Zacchaeus, Luke 19:1–10). I again refer Williams to my papers on biblical justice and biblical economics.⁸

Williams objects to my claim that implementing environmental and conservationist policies will result in the suffering and death of millions of human beings, and labels it as alarmist, inflammatory and a ‘straw man’ argument because I provide no examples. So let me provide some examples: Cheap energy and infrastructure are necessary to lift people out of poverty and significantly improve their health and life expectancy. All these things require the extraction and application of natural resources such as coal, oil, gas, iron ore, bauxite, zinc oxide, etc., or the clearing of land for agriculture or the placement of infrastructure such as roads, railways, pipelines, etc. Yet overly protectionist environmental policies prevent the poor from exploiting these natural resources and building basic infrastructure, and thus the poor miss out on the wealth and the benefits that these things produce. Williams appears to prefer that the poor be consigned to the harsh life of hunter/gatherer existence or subsistence farming, remaining dependent on the charity of the rich, rather than learning to generate their own wealth.

Open-cut mining

Regarding open-cut mining, Williams points to an example of such an operation that has caused significant pollution and adverse environmental impacts. But no one is denying that some mining operations are badly run and cause substantial pollution. From a Christian perspective

we must endeavour to stop and prevent such pollution and environmental destruction. But examples of pollution caused by mining do not imply that all mining necessarily causes pollution. For example, there are no significant pollution issues with the open cut brown coal mines of central Victoria.

Agricultural development

With respect to agricultural development, Williams points to the drop in productivity of land in the Western Australian wheat-belt as a result of bad farming practices. Again, no one denies that unsustainable agriculture has taken place, especially in the past before farmers understood the impact of total land-clearing and overcropping—although David F. Smith points out that many of the claims about past farming practices are just green myths.⁹ In any case, we should work hard to prevent such damage, restore the land and make sure that similar problems do not occur again.

Williams also objects to my comments about deforestation and notes that virtually all countries with tropical rainforests are under siege by unsustainable and often illegal deforestation. Yes, many forests are being cleared, but, as I pointed out, many of these cleared forests are also being replanted. I agree that in some areas forests are being harvested uncontrollably and not replanted. These are issues of concern and we should seek to fix these problems.

Environmental concerns and exaggeration

In response to my pointing out the concerns of environmentalists, Williams gives a confusing criticism:

“Perhaps Marie Curie and the luminous dial painters didn’t die from exposure to radium, thalidomide didn’t create deformed babies, asbestos didn’t cause asbestosis and mesothelioma, mercury didn’t cause Minamata disease, DDT isn’t dangerous to wildlife, the Bhopal and Chernobyl explosions had no environmental impact, the International Commission on Radiation Protection is wasting its time, likewise environmental protection authorities, therapeutic goods and food safety watchdogs.”

What is it that Williams objects to? Does he deny that environmentalists make the claims I describe? He appears to be assuming that I am denying all these claims when in fact I pass no judgment on any of them—at least at this point in my paper.

I do not deny that thalidomide caused deformed babies or that asbestos caused asbestosis and mesothelioma, but these are dangers to human beings not to the environment. Williams seems to be forgetting that radium and other common radioactive elements are not human manufactured products but occur naturally. Indeed, Australian Aborigines used to make cave paintings of people with swollen joints warning others not to venture into areas of Kakadu and Arnhem Land where there are rich uranium deposits.

Mercury has been used around the world and throughout the centuries in many ancient and modern applications, including in science and medicine (e.g. mercury thermometer), yet the world has not come to an end nor has the environment been completely destroyed as a result. While it is true that mercury caused Minamata disease, that was only because the Chisso Corporation dumped mercury compounds in Minamata Bay from 1932–1968! This is clearly in breach of the company’s duty of care and a case of not acting appropriately as God’s stewards of His creation. Although the Chernobyl explosion had some environmental impact, the World Health Organisation’s investigation revealed that it caused nowhere near the destruction that many environmentalists claim.¹⁰

I do, however, deny that DDT is dangerous to wildlife. Extensive research has shown that it is completely safe—indeed, it can even be ingested in regular and large quantities with no effects.¹¹ Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* is a fraud and a fairytale. One thing that is not a fairytale, is the fact that literally millions of human beings made in the image of God have needlessly died from Malaria since the banning of DDT!

Ultimately, Williams has apparently missed the entire point of the sentences he quotes. When read in context it is quite clear that my point is that the claims and concerns of environmentalists—legitimate or not—have led many people and especially those in the environmental movement to stand completely against all industrialisation and development. No one denies that development and industrial projects that are badly planned and constructed can and do have significant negative impact on the environment, but that does not mean or imply that all industrial and development projects will cause environmental problems. This is where environmental protection authorities, therapeutic goods and food safety watchdogs have an important role—in ensuring that any possible detrimental effects are identified and mitigated.

The priority of human beings and human needs

Williams also denies that the needs of human beings surpass the needs of any other creature or plant, claiming that “this attitude is diametrically opposed to Jesus’ attitude towards dominion” because He came not to be served, but to serve. But Jesus came to serve *human beings* not animals and plants! In any case, these verses relate not to Christ’s dominion but His willingness to lay down His life. I note also that Williams has cherry-picked a single verse from the hymn in Philippians 2. The hymn goes on to affirm Christ’s absolute dominion over all creation: “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Furthermore, I do not deny that human welfare is somewhat dependant on the welfare of other creatures.

My comments only concerned the resolution of clashes between the interests of human beings and the interests of animals. When there is an *unavoidable* clash between the interests of human beings and the interests of animals, the interests of human beings must prevail. Put differently, it is more important to feed, clothe and house human beings than it is to maintain the natural habitat of a particular species of parrot.

Extinctions

Williams includes this quote from my paper: “to what extent have extinctions been caused by human activity? ... The fossil record is full of extinct creatures ... that had little or no contact with human beings.” The whole point of the great Flood was as a judgment upon the sinfulness of all humanity (Genesis 6). But Williams has mutilated what I had actually said. Yes, the Flood was a result of human sin, but that sin involved violence and corruption not environmental and ecological destruction! My point is that many, many creatures die in natural disasters without ever coming into contact with human beings.

Regarding species extinction, Williams objects to my claim that such extinctions “had no measurable impact on the earth or any human community”. I would very much appreciate it if Williams would explain to me what significant detrimental effects the extinction of the Kangaroo Island Emu, Quagga, Dodo, and Tasmanian Tiger had on the earth and what great harm it caused to human society? He goes on to argue that humans are entirely dependent upon enormously complex networks of many different kinds of life. Again, no-one is disputing this, but how does the extinction of the above named species (and many others) break these “enormously complex networks”? Williams argues that as each species is lost, the resilience of the whole system becomes one species closer to collapse. But can new species not emerge? In any case, even if this were the case it would only affect the local ecosystem. At a different location, the species may thrive. Furthermore, Williams argues that with every species that becomes extinct it degrades the quality of the biosphere and every mutation passed on to our offspring degrades our species’ genome. But this argument does not make any sense. Williams is concerned about the degradation of the genome, but all species have emerged due to a loss of information caused by the degradation of the genome! So why is Williams so concerned about the loss of a species when it is quite probable that the reason it has become extinct is because its genome has become so degraded that it can no longer adapt to any variation in its environment?

Williams apparently wants to develop an economy in which each person shares equitably in both the costs and the benefits of ‘having dominion over our living space’. This is essentially the same belief and argument of the far left green movement (e.g. Peter Singer and Senator Bob Brown).

The problem is that the “real price ... spread ... equitably amongst all people” is the suffering and/or death of many hundreds, thousands or millions of people. That is a price that I, nor any other Christian, should be willing to pay.

Williams goes on to make the following argument:

“Let’s now imagine that hidden away in a tiny crevice that the engineers overlooked is a virus that was not on the approved list of species. Imagine that it gets out and begins to infect our food-producing, air-renewing, water-cleaning, and soil-conditioning species. One by one our species list gets shorter and shorter. Eventually it gets down to just one, *Homo sapiens*. We cannot feed ourselves or recycle our wastes and so we too very soon become extinct.”

Let us also imagine that humans have the capacity to eradicate this virus. However, the virus is also directly or indirectly essential to the survival of some other animal or plant species. Thus, in destroying the virus, we would also eradicate the other animal or plant species. Should human beings allow themselves to become extinct for the sake of the other animal or plant species? This is, in reality, what our choice may come down to: either some animal or plant goes extinct—or we do.

Relying on God’s provision

Williams declares that the notion that God will protect and provide for His creation is encouraging humanity to build with “wood, hay and straw”. In doing so, he unfortunately performs another quote mutilation. What I actually said was that “we are to have faith in God and His providential work, having full confidence that He can and will protect His creation and provide all that we need”. In other words, we must rely on God’s providence, goodness and provision.

God’s relationship to animals

Citing Revelation 4:6–9, Williams argues that “[v]ast numbers of non-human created beings surround God and worship Him day and night ... There are four animals amongst them ... The word used to describe them is the ordinary word for an animal.” However, Williams’ claim about the meaning of the word used to describe the creatures is simply not correct. The word used can refer to extraordinary/mythical animals as well. The standard Greek Lexicon, BDAG, includes the following definition: “a creature that transcends normal descriptive categories and is freq. composite.” BDAG even explicitly lists Revelation 4:6–9 as a specific instance of this meaning.¹² In any case, this is an apocalyptic vision not a literal description of the dwelling place of God. It draws from the picture in Ezekiel 1 (vv 5–21) and Ezekiel 10:12–15, 20–22. Moreover, it is likely that the four figures are designed to be representative of the whole created order of animate life.¹³ Metzger believes they symbolize, respectively, “what is the noblest, strongest, wisest, and swiftest in creation.”¹⁴ Beale explains:

“The hymns in these verses interpret the vision of God on the throne surrounded by heavenly beings, fire, and a sea ... to mean that God is holy ... and sovereign over creation ... which demonstrates his ‘worthiness’ ... to be praised, worshiped, and glorified ... *The hymns make explicit the main point of the vision and of the whole chapter: God is to be glorified because of his holiness and sovereignty. This section also tells why the four living beings represent the whole of animate life. They are performing the function that all creation is meant to fulfill. That is, all things were created to praise God for his holiness and glorify him for his work of creation.* 5:13 bears out that this is not only the ideal purpose for all creatures but also that some day this purpose will actually be fulfilled, not only in heaven but also on earth, since it is an anticipation of the consummation.”¹⁵

So this passage has nothing to do with God loving and caring for animals. The focus here is on God, not on the creatures!

Williams also appeals to Genesis 2 where God brought all the animals to Adam so he could find a prospective companion as an instance of God’s love and care of his non-human creatures. This just does not follow at all, and the point in this passage is that no suitable companion for Adam was found!

Williams points out that Jesus affirmed God’s care for sparrows and lilies of the field. But Jesus also affirmed that human beings are worth much more than sparrows! Matt 10:31: “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.”

In addition, the Old Testament sacrificial system also indicates the priority of human beings over animals in respect to their relationship with God. Human beings had to make offerings to God. Animals did not. Moreover, most of those offerings were sacrifices of animals to atone for sin and guilt, as well as for offerings of worship (Lev 23). Note also that the sacrifice of animals was only sufficient to atone for sin. It took the death of a human being (God in the flesh) to fully propitiate for sin.

Concluding comments

I fully agree with Williams that the profit motive is completely consistent with God’s promise of fruitfulness, and that the sinful nature of man must be constantly dealt with. But I certainly do not advocate open slather development without any regard for the environment or the impact it will have on other animal creatures. To think so is to fundamentally misunderstand my papers. Unfortunately, it appears to me that many of Williams’ misunderstandings and objections are indeed a result of not reading my papers carefully enough.

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