

Ethics in the Anthropocene

By [Lisa Landoe](#)

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Last week in Stockholm, humanity was put on [trial](#).

Almost 20 Nobel laureates showed up for jury duty at the third Nobel Laureate Symposium. There they heard about "how [humanity's] vast imprint on the planet's environment has shifted the Earth into a new geological period labeled the '[Anthropocene](#)'--the Age of Man."

After deliberation, the Nobelists rendered a [verdict](#) as part of the Stockholm Memorandum ([pdf](#)), reporting that humans have become the most significant driver of global change. While schoolchildren are taught that we are still in the Holocene--the epoch that began after the last ice age, roughly 12,000 years ago--the symposium's scientists argue that we have transgressed the planetary boundaries that have kept civilizations safe for this long.

There's no question that humans have become "capable of leaving a durable imprint in the geological record." But is this necessarily a bad thing?

In a *New York Times*

forum called [The](#)

[Age of Anthropocene: Should We Worry?](#) ecologist Erle C. Ellis makes an interesting point: we can either write the planet off as irrecoverably ruined, or we can redefine what the orienting "good" is in environmental ethics. "This is where it gets tricky," he says:

What "good" replaces pristineness?

Biodiversity? Ecosystem services that benefit humans? Historical fidelity?

Beauty? The most pleasure for the most sentient species?

Environmentalism often takes a preservationist angle; its aim has been to make minimal changes to pristine habitats. But now many

habitats are so clearly "artificial" that preservationism seems pointless.

Habitats and species evolve in a complex system of interdependence. This is a difficult concept to grasp. How are we Christians to think about and rethink our responsibilities in this era?

Some see new opportunities for generosity: for attentive practical reasoning, greater devotion and covenantal responsibility. "Because the world is a commonwealth of interdependent creatures in common dependence on

God," [writes](#)

theologian Douglas F. Ottati,

[and] because the *telos* of God's world is the radically transformative and inclusive community, acknowledged relationships and communities of interdependence enhance possibilities for true virtue, for *life*, or for appropriately faithful participation in God's world.

However we define this new epoch, the issues we face are international in scope, and they will demand clear ethical frameworks.