

Religion NOW

A Paper for Post-Modern Religion

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ECO-THEOLOGY

*The time has come for a new Pentecost
a renewed humanity to begin the task
of healing the environment*

Why are some people so disturbed about pollution of air and water? It is an indication they are realizing we have reached a critical point in human habitation of the earth. We are now facing an ecological crisis. Having fouled our nest, depleting our planet's store of non-renewable resources at an alarming rate, humankind is being confronted by an ultimatum to heal our earth or face our own destruction.

Away back around 400 BCE, the Hebrew prophet Joel spoke earnestly to the people regarding conserving their land and made it a religious issue. The community had suffered a prolonged and savage drought, accompanied by a plague of locusts. The people went through a disastrous time of famine. Joel spoke to this trouble and called for better husbandry of their land and a deeper commitment to the creative spirit of God.

"Be dismayed, you farmers, wail, you vinedressers, over the wheat and the barley; for the crops of the field are ruined. The vine withers, the fig tree droops. Pomegranate, palm, and apple - all the trees of the field are dried up; surely, joy withers away among the people." (Joel 1:11,12).

Joel stresses the need of a change of heart to protect the land and its resources. Repentance is in order, Joel exhorts. The earth's suffering needs to be acknowledged and a day of healing enacted.

"Then afterward I will pour my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your

old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions." (Joel 2:28).

We have been a great deal more effective in our time at destroying nature. Fire, the axe, the plough, weapons, and the bulldozer have enabled us to ravage the earth for our immediate gain. We ignore nature's laws that are so contrived that land, water, plants and animals should, and under natural conditions do, exist in harmony and interdependence for perpetual productiveness.

Nature has been at work for millions of years to get things as they are. Cause and effect are tied together like stones in a well-built wall. Without careful investigation one can never tell which is a keystone, the removal of which will bring down a large section of the structure in ruin.

We are an integral part of our

(ECO-THEOLOGY, continued)

environment. "Nature" embraces all existing things - the land, the waters, the vegetation, the animals ...and human beings. In fact, we are not only a part of our world, but of the universe. What we do impinges upon the rest, and what happens to the rest of creation bears upon us.

We have disregarded our place in the balance of nature for too long, and we are face to face with our own conflict between the principle of freedom to use and destroy, and the principle of husbandry to use wisely and replenish. We can imagine the trees and the wild creatures and the earth itself watching and listening, alive and aware, holding their breaths in anticipation of what their human neighbours will do with their common heritage.

Good-Bye Frontier Mentality

Theology today must centre upon ecology and conservation of nature. The Old Testament creation story, the first written of two, found in Genesis 2: 4f, views humanity and nature in balance. According to this early "J" version of the creation myth, after God created man he set him in a garden watered by a river and filled with "every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food." Man was given instructions on how to care for the garden and told to "till and keep it." The animals were to be man's "helpers" and were given names by him. He was given a hospitable environment in which he could live in peace and harmony with all forms of life.

In this original creation story there is nothing "fallen" about humankind or nature. There is no split between body and soul, between nature and mind.

Adam, the name in English coming

from the Hebrew word "Adamah", meaning "of the earth", describes us as part of the earth but having within us the wind of life. We cannot be divided into a clay body and a divine soul.

Let it be noted that it is this early "J" story which tells the beautiful fable of the creation of woman as the partner of man. In the Hebrew language used by "J" she was equal to man, a true partner. In fact there is irony in the story as man was created out of clay and woman was created out of a living being, as if God had learned better how the job ought to be done.

The narrative continues, taking into account the disruption that has taken place between humans and nature. Humankind became the agent of disequilibrium. Ignoring our mortality we act like we are gods. The driving of the humans from the Garden of Eden in this creation story was done, not because the humans were disobedient, but because they tried to be gods.

As we continue to upset the balance of nature, mistakenly thinking we can regulate nature scientifically, we must see that we must return to a God-centred ascetic world, careful not to try and return to a rustic, pre-industrial time, but a religious revival honouring the earth and the good life, concerned about the forces that destroy the land, such as greedy exploitation, ignorance of wise husbandry, and protection only of that of nature which are merchantable. We must become religiously sensitive of the earth's fertility and its beauty.

Religion connects the fruitfulness of nature with justice and faithfulness on our part. Otherwise we will destroy each other. We must have a healthy natural order and justice among all people. We need

(Healthy Natural Order, cont'd)

a renaissance, a rebirth based on a spiritual initiative, a global religious awakening, to heal our earth and to save the life both of our natural world and ourselves.

Then the prophecy of Joel may come true:

*"In that day
the mountains shall drip sweet
wine,
the hills shall flow with milk,
and all the stream beds of
Judah
shall flow with water;*

-Joel 3:18

A HEALTHY PLANET IS AN ESSENTIAL PART
OF SPIRITUAL LIFE.

One of the greatest failures in the total course of Christianity is the failure of Christians to respond to the crisis of the earth, declared the Rev. Thomas Berry, retired Roman Catholic priest at the Spring Convocation of St. Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, when an honorary degree was conferred upon him.

"By harming the earth we harm ourselves," Berry stressed. "World religions share blame for ecological catastrophes," he said.

Humankind is suffering from a disease that threatens the existence of the planet, said Berry pointing out that anybody who destroys the air, the water, the soil and living forms is committing "a deep cultural pathology. Nothing this serious has happened to the planet in 65 million years," he said. The religions, and particular Christianity, share blame for what has happened to the earth's environment, he

declared.

Much of the worst environmental damage to the world is the work of European Christians, who believed they were doing the right thing.

"There's hardly any natural form on the planet that has not suffered imperilment by a people that thought of themselves as the wisest, the most spiritual, the most competent," said Berry, adding, "There is some kind of fixation in Europeans that they held the answer to everything."

"Good people are dangerous because good people with an adequate idea of what's good, the better they are, the worse the consequences," argued Berry.

Berry stated the heart of the problem is the ability of human institutions, be they religious, political, economic or intellectual, to consider anything but their own narrow interests, without any regard for other life forms.

"That is the catastrophic way of seeing the world. Religions are too biased, governments too subservient, the economists too acquisitive, the universities should have some sense," Berry exclaimed.

It is the obtuseness of religious people to think that we can damage the outer world without damaging the inner world, Berry said. "The inner life of the human has to be activated by the outer world of nature. If that doesn't take place, then humans will not have any real spiritual sense."

And despite humankind's generally dismal record in recognizing that connection, Berry remains confident that the earth can be saved for future generations. "There's always hope, and the planet has a great deal of resilience," he said, and called upon those who manage the earth to begin to act with sense.

BUILDING THE EARTH

Among the notable religious thinkers and writers of our time was Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. A priest of the Roman Catholic Church, a scientist, philosopher, and theologian, de Chardin saw the advance of all creation in optimistic and upward evolving progress. "Some day," he wrote, "after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness - for God - the energies of love. And then, for the second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire."

A BALLAD OF ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS

The cost of building dams is always underestimated
 There's erosion of the delta that the river has created,
 There's fertile soil below the dam that's likely to be looted,
 And the tangled mat of forest that has got to be uprooted.

There's the breaking up of cultures with old haunts' and habits' loss,
 There's the education programme that just doesn't come across,
 And the wasted fruits of progress that are seldom much enjoyed
 By expelled subsistence farmers who are urban unemployed.

There's disappointing yield of fish, beyond the first explosion;
 There's silting up, and drawing down, and watershed erosion.
 Above the dam the water's lost by sheer evaporation;
 Below, the river scours, and suffers dangerous alteration.

For engineers, however good, are likely to be guilty
 Of quietly forgetting that a river

can be silty, while the irrigation people too are frequently forgetting
 That water poured upon the land is likely to be wetting.

Then the water in the lake, and what the lake releases,
 Is crawling with infected snails and water borne diseases.
 There's a hideous locust breeding ground when water level's low,
 And a million ecologic facts we really do not know.

There are benefits, of course, which may be countable, but which
 Have a tendency to fall into the pockets of the rich,
 While the costs are apt to fall upon the shoulders of the poor.
 So cost-benefit analysis is nearly always sure
 To justify the building of a solid concrete fact,
 While the Ecologic Truth is left behind in the Abstract.

- Kenneth E. Boulding
 (From T. Farvar and J. Milton, "The Careless Technology," Tom Stacey, London, 1973).

The Ten Commandments, though still valid, are completely lacking in concern for our relationship to other species and to the earth itself. They prohibit adultery, murder and lying, but say nothing about the rights of animals, plants, rivers, oceans, or forests. We need an eleventh commandment which says: Thou shalt not commit genocide, the killing of the planet.

-Tom Harper, religion columnist, *The Toronto Star*.

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