

Ecology and the Church: Theology and Action

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As the destruction wrought by pollution and human disregard for nature increases, churches are beginning to explore what their role is in protecting the environment. Though some are already addressing environmental issues, they will need to adopt a more urgent theological stance and course of action if we are to avoid the prognosis offered by M. K. Tolba, director of the United Nations Environmental Program: "We face by the turn of the century an environmental catastrophe as complete, as irreversible, as any nuclear holocaust" if present trends continue.

Church leaders worldwide are spurring their congregations on to ecological action, and the resulting enthusiastic support is fast approaching the dimensions of the 1960s civil rights movement in America. But this ministry needs a theological foundation, biblical support for which may not be quite as obvious as support for some other issues. As Quaker writer and environmentalist Marshall Massey asks, how do we reconcile wilderness protection with Jesus' assertion that "my Kingdom is not of this world"? An increasing number of religious thinkers are rising to this challenge.

For example, Philip N. Joranson of the United Church of Christ justifies environmentalism with creation centered theology. A forester, evolutionist and geneticist, Joranson, along with Ken Burigan, edited the book *Cry of the Environment: Rebuilding the Christian Creation Tradition* (Bear, 1985), a significant religious and ethical resource for dealing with environmental issues. Contributors to the book include Bernhard Anderson of Princeton Theological Seminary, Conrad Bonifazi of Humboldt State University, Ralph Wendell Burhoe of Meadville/Lombard Theological School, and G. Ledyard Stebbins of the University of California at Davis. Joranson has studied genetics, process philosophy, Teilhard de Chardin's theology, Zen and Shinto. In 1979 he and colleagues from the Graduate Theological Union Center for Ethics and Social Policy, and the University of California at Berkeley, developed a course in creation centered theology.

Cry of the Environment challenges our present environmental policies with a visibility and appropriate action. Although the dominant Christian tradition has often regarded the nonhuman creation with disinterest, if not outright hostility, this tradition does contain some vital, constructive elements, which Joranson and Butigan attempt to retrieve and transform. Their book celebrates the cosmos, develops a spirituality of care and collaboration between nature and humanity, and outlines harmonious and reverential social policy and action.

Theologian Nelson Reppert summarizes the tenets of creation-centered theology. Creation, he says, is the primary revelation of the Creator, the primary scripture and the primary locus of divine-human communion. In this scheme, salvation, characterized by both deliverance and blessing, is the process of imaging wholeness and unity (*imago Dei*). Jesus' incarnation is the archetype of the divine presence and agency dwelling in the midst of all reality. The continuing creation, with emphasis on both its dependence upon God and humanity's responsibility as cocreators in God's image, is moving toward eternal fulfillment.

Speaking from the Roman Catholic tradition, Matthew Fox, O.P., director for the Institute in Culture and Creation Spirituality at Holy Names College in Oakland, California, has contributed much to creation-centered theology. He established the Bear Publishing Company to distribute books on environment and religion, including his work *Original Blessing* (1983). In his popular creation spirituality workshops, he teaches that the environment is a divine womb, holy and worthy of reverence and respect. He honors the natural world as a most profound expression of the divine. In Fox's theology, salvation is not an individual matter, but a healing of God's people and the cosmos. Fox would replace fall/redemption theology with this concept, because, he writes, it presents "new possibilities between spirituality and science that would shape the paradigms for culture, its institutions, and its people. These paradigms would be powerful in their capacity to transform" (*Original Blessing*, pp. 11, 12).

The Quaker tradition also points toward the towering spiritual dimension of the human relationship to the environment. In his book *The Defense of the Peaceable Kingdom* (Religious Society of Friends, 1985), Marshall Massey refers to John Woolman's approach of testing against the Light every commonly accepted idea and custom. We need to apply this scrutiny to the social conditioning behind environmental abuse, he contends. To support environmentalism Massey uses various New Testament themes, including the nurturing of the helpless, respect for the interrelatedness of life, and stewardship.

While all current eco-theology encourages action, the EcoJustice Working Group of the National Council of Churches has focused on it. Coined in 1972 by a Baptist planning group, the term "ecoJustice" promotes the protection of a healthy environment and justice for all people. These two concerns are neither arbitrary nor separable; rather, the economic and the ecological are two facets of the same concern for the earth and its creatures. At the group's consultation last December keynote speaker William A. Gibson said that "theologies of creation must not neglect the liberation of people. Creation includes humanity. Nature and the poor are both victims of oppression. They will be liberated together or not at all. The term ecojustice is not to be understood as in any sense turning away from concern for justice in the social order but rather as combining justice for people with justice to the rest of creation."

The consultation sought to forge working partnerships between church groups and major environmental organizations like the Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth. The EcoJustice group wanted to affirm its common cause with secular activists while raising their awareness of related social justice concerns. For instance, the EcoJustice group supported the environmental groups' proposed legislation on acid rain (the NCC itself also supported that legislation, which has not been passed), but also urged finding a solution that would take into account the coal miners who would be hurt by tougher anti pollution laws.

Most ecologists welcome the EcoJustice group's perspective. David Baker, director of Friends of the Earth, urges: "The churches need to tell environmentalists that ecological issues are social justice issues at heart. We need to talk about right and wrong. I am getting very tired of arguing that it is in the 'self-interest' of people to work for a cleaner and safer environment."

Many churches have made some statement or encouraged action on environmental issues. According to William A. Gibson, strongest thus far in its institutional stance on environmental issues is the United Methodist Church, which addresses ecology concerns primarily through its Department of Environmental Justice. The United Methodist bishops' strong statement on nuclear war, "In Defense of Creation," is being adapted by MacGregor Smith, director of the Institute for Environmental Ethics in Miami, Florida, for teaching and action on environmental questions. Presbyterian and Episcopal laypeople are urging their denominations' administrators to make environmental concerns a greater priority. And in the Catholic Church, the American bishops' pastoral letter on the economy mentioned the need to care for the environment. This statement echoed the document "Strangers and Guests," prepared in 1980 by 72 bishops in mid-western dioceses. The bishops used the biblical image of human beings as strangers and guests on the earth to emphasize our responsibilities to the biosphere.

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CHD) is contributing funds to many conservation efforts around the country. Among these are the Missoula (Montana) People's Action, a multi issue community organization particularly concerned about water poisoning in the Missoula area; the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes (headquartered in Arlington, Virginia); the Vermonters Toxic Education Project, which helps local groups clean up toxic sites around the state; and the Kentucky group, Save Our Cumberland Mountains, which fights the environmental destruction caused by openpit mining.

Jews, also, are active in the environmental movement. For example, the World Jewish Congress has been working with the worldwide Fund for Nature to consider a joint project. Individual Jews are involved in virtually every major environmental group, and Israel has a very active environmental organization, the Israeli Group for the Preservation of the Environment.

Christians are confronting ecological concerns in interdenominational organizations as well. Vincent Rossi, director of the Holy Order of MANS (Eastern Orthodox Church), formed the Eleventh Commandment Fellowship in 1979 to integrate spirituality into concern for the environment. "The eleventh

commandment," says Rossi, is: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; thou shalt not despoil the earth, nor destroy the life thereon." Chapters in over 20 cities strengthen the Fellowship's influence. Members are encouraged to follow a seven point program which promotes a personal and public environmental ethic.

The recently organized North American Conference on Christianity and Ecology (NACCE) is attempting to interest as many churches as possible in ecology. Its upcoming conference in August at North Webster, Indiana, an ecumenical event involving at least two dozen denominations will focus on an "Implementation Document" that can be adapted by any church to reflect its theological and local situations. Upon completion the document will be circulated to as many individual congregations as possible. NACCE is also developing a hemispheric corps of field representatives and planning a conference to address major ecological questions from a religious perspective.

Despite many churches' burgeoning interest in environmentalism, ecological activists both inside and outside church circles express dismay that Christians, confronted by impending environmental disaster, are not doing more to shift from a historical "sin and salvation" focus to an ecological one. For example, some have suggested that Pope John Paul II missed an opportunity to speak out on behalf of threatened tropical rainforests when he visited Brazil last year.

But Karen Bloomquist, assistant professor of church and society at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, points out that Christianity has a strong hierarchical tradition which has "legitimized and fostered domination over people and nature." This "anti egalitarian, patriarchal, nature dominating theology" set up a hierarchy with God at the top, followed by men, women, children, animals and plants in that order, says Bloomquist.

"The undeveloped key to the environmental crisis," writes Fred Krueger, national director of the North American Conference on Christianity and Ecology in San Francisco, "is to tap the power inherent in the churches. No other body has the potential to fire the conscience into renewed activity on behalf of the earth.....As a people, we've been commissioned 'to replenish the earth' (Gen. 1:28). What other justification or incentive do we need to begin?"