

Messing With Creation

Are we willing to change our self-destructive ways? Is there still time to save the environment, or are we already too late? According to some scientists the ecosystem is on the road to extinction. In Canada alone a total of 183 species of animals and plants are now in jeopardy. The Third World is one of the major offenders; uncaring governments, the head-on rush into industrialization, overgrazing, and wars that have laid waste land, brought famine, and disturbed the ecological balance in general. China, with its one billion inhabitants, "is modernizing with smoke stacks belching black coal smoke. Since the 1949 revolution and the drive for industrialization, the environment in China has been at the mercy of a largely inept, and often corrupt officialdom. .

Environmentalists are alarmed. There is no time to waste. "We have only 10 years to change course," says Thomas Lovejoy, a Washington biologist credited with bringing the plunder of the rain forests to the attention of the world. Maurice Strong, head of the United Nations' first environment program, observed, "What we do or don't do in the next decade will largely set the course . . . If we don't we are on the pathway to the demise of the human species."

The environmentalists are being heard! The *Wall Street Journal* proclaimed 1988 "the year earth screamed." *Time magazine* named the earth "Planet of the Year." Asia week, based in Hong Kong, devoted much time and space to environmental issues.

Whose Fault?

Who is responsible for today's horrific ecological crisis? Who do we blame? The general trend in the media is to place it squarely on the Judeo-Christian belief system. Digby McLaren, president of the Royal Society, an association of Canada's most distinguished scientists, claims that many religions are "extremely dangerous" to human survival. He says that God's admonition to Abraham (!) in Genesis to be fruitful and multiply--using the earth and its plants and animals--"was the beginning of exploitation and dominance by humans over creation and is the basis of Christianity, Judaism and Islam." In an article in *Time* (Oct. 9/89), Dennis Overbye lays a similar charge. He remarks that with the rise of a scientific, clock-work cosmos and missionary Christianity, with its message of man's dominion and relentless hostile attitude towards paganism, nature was metaphorically transformed. "It became dead meat."

The historian Lynn White wrote an article in *Science* (March; 1967), entitled, "The historical roots of our ecological crisis." And the reader can guess where those roots are found--in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Doesn't the creation story teach that man has to rule over the earth? Didn't God intend everything for the well-being of man? Every element in the physical creation had no other purpose than to serve human interests. So the Genesis account of man as the crown of God's creation leads to our current ecological crisis. Because of the man-centered approach to nature in the Judeo-Christian tradition, human beings have always used or misused nature at will. Because of the disastrous distance in the Bible between man and nature, man has never been taught that the breakdown of the environment can be the destruction of himself.

Hope in the East?

Where to find solutions if Christianity is the culprit? A new religious perspective is developing which teaches that human survival depends upon living in harmony with all life-forms on planet earth. This new perspective is strongly , influenced by oriental religious thought and evolutionism. Many in the West have become enamored by oriental religions, without really knowing their faith and practice. Many believe that oriental religions have more to offer than the Christian faith. Digby McLaren says, "Oriental religions--Taoism, Buddhism and Hinduism--tend to emphasize that man is inside nature, at one with it, not dominant over it."

Oriental religions are radically different from the Christian faith. They, offer a totally opposite perspective of man and nature. The church has rejected faith in the presence of spirits in plants and animals as pagan animism, whereas oriental religions held on to animism and thus revered nature as sacred. For example, Buddhist scholars, who have strongly influenced the New Age Movement, believe that their faith is superior to the Christian faith as far as its view of nature is concerned. In 1985, in Thailand, an educational program called the "Buddhist Perception of Nature Project" was founded. It is administered by American-born Nancy Nash and a group of Thai and Tibetan scholars. The project seeks to turn spiritual and cultural values into ecological action. The project's chief scholar Professor Chatsumarn Kabilsingh claims that the nature oriented teachings of Buddha are "as valid today as they were 2,500 years ago." He notes that Buddhist monks still live in forest monasteries and carry water strainers to avoid consuming tiny life forms they cannot even see. The project organizers believe that few religions are so well disposed towards nature as Buddhism. "In Buddhism and most oriental thought, we tend to look at human beings as a part of nature," says Chatsumarn. "We don't go out to conquer it as they do it in the West."

The increasingly influential New Age movement also blames Christianity for the present ecological crisis. It believes that a God distinct and separate from nature can do little to keep the sacred quality of nature. New Age deifies nature. Christianity must be abandoned. It stands in the way of progress and salvation of man and nature. It must be replaced by a faith in the oneness of all things--God, man and nature. Only this faith can give a balanced view of our environment and insure our survival.

The New Agers have not only borrowed from the Orient; they have also swallowed evolutionism. Evolutionism is also religious in character. Rene, Dubos, author of *A God Within-A positive philosophy for a more complete fulfillment of human Potentials*, writes that a truly ecological view of the world has religious overtones. Though a committed evolutionist, he calls the earth sacred. He remarks,

"The adjective `sacred' may be surprising in a description of the characteristics of this planet, and yet it expresses an attitude which has deep roots in the human past and still persists now. The very fact that the word `desecration' is commonly used to lament the damage men are causing to the environment indicates that many of us have a feeling that the earth has sanctity, that man's relation to it has a sacred quality. "

Earth is also referred to as mother. Dubos says that man is "earthy" because the earth is literally our mother, not only because we depend on her for nutrition and shelter, but even more because the human species "has been shaped by her in the womb of evolution." Mother earth must replace Father God. So Christians are told to abandon the faith. We need a changed attitude, a new faith, more education, and more science. Without these we won't have a chance to save, let alone to improve our environment.

A Christian Response

Many critics of the Christian faith are ignorant of its teachings. They make accusations without having examined the Scriptures with care. To say that the Christian religion is at the root of the ecological crisis is slander. Where are some of the worst polluters? In Russia and China! Communist nations! In their haste to condemn, secularists have either short memories or have done poor research. History bears out that Christian communities have played a positive role in the emancipation process of nations. True, Christians have often neglected God's demands and promises. They have not always been the salt of the earth, just caretakers of God's world. And we may not confuse nominal cultural Christendom with the biblical Christian faith. The roots of laissez faire capitalism cannot be traced to Scripture. Numerous studies have clearly demonstrated this.

Secularists are not the only ones who toll the alarm bells. Christians have also become increasingly alarmed. Calvin DeWitt, a leader in the Christian ecological movement and director of the Mancelon, Michigan-based Au. Sable Institute of Environmental Studies, has remarked that ten years ago there was such a nominal interest in the environment that a Christian who was concerned with the stewardship of creation would feel rather helpless, very lonely, and he would probably be driven to join the Sierra Club and just forget about trying to integrate Christianity and environmentalism. DeWitt is overstating the case. He may be right about a general lack of interest by many Christians; however, already some twenty years ago articles and books written by evangelicals began to appear. Dr. F. Schaeffer's *Pollution and the Death of Man, The Christian View of Ecology* was published in 1970. I have made my own small contribution. In 1973 I wrote "*The Environmental Crisis; A Search for a Christian Answer*" (Calvinist Contact, Sept. 10); and in 1978, *Evangelical Thrust* in the Philippines published my article "*Towards the Development of the Doctrine of Creation.*" Other examples could be mentioned. Christians have not been silent.

A Christian View of Man and His World

Who is man? What is his place in the world? He is God's image-bearer, who has received gifts and talents for developing God's world. Man was not made an exploiter. Man was to be a steward. He was to look after planet earth. And he was responsible to God for his actions. God demanded responsible action, a just society and careful consumption. Man's talents can be used either for building-up or breaking-down God's world, for working for justice or injustice. This principle of responsible stewardship is the key to solving the ecological crisis.

The Bible has an ecological message. In His infinite wisdom God provided clear guidelines for stewardly living. Far from exploiting creation or demeaning it, the biblical faith provides for a sound approach to ecology, especially in the many Old Testament laws which relate to the use of the land.

The New Age movement and evolutionary approaches are not able to offer sound solutions. Oriental religions differ substantially from the Christian faith as they blur the distinction between the Creator and the creation. There is no personal God to whom man is responsible. If all is one no distinction can be made between good and evil, between cruelty and noncruelty.

Pelagianism

Many environmentalists have an upbeat view of man; a steadfast faith in his perfectibility. Ecology and theology are intertwined. If man is basically good we can expect him to change for the better. At a meeting held in May 1970 under the auspices of UNESCO, specialists on aggression unanimously rejected the theory of instinctive human aggressiveness. They agreed that people act violently because they have been taught to do so, or made to do so, and not because they were born aggressive. "To kill is not an instinct, but a specially acquired trait."

What do we need to make a better world? More education, a greater ecological awareness! This view of man is Pelagian! Pelagius was a British monk who lived in the beginning of the 5th century. He argued that by nature people are wholesome and good. He taught that God commanded man to be perfect and God would not command anything that lies beyond his capacity. Man's moral character lies in his own hands. And God will help those who help themselves. This optimistic view of man is still with us. Man can exercise his free will insofar as he employs faultlessly the natural talents he possesses. All that is needed are proper guidelines, the will to change the world, the resolve to do better. Pelagianism was condemned by the church because it underestimated man's natural inclination to do evil. He has the natural tendency to hate God and his neighbors. Nothing justifies his faith in human goodness. Just read the newspapers and listen to the news broadcasts. They confirm what the Bible teaches. "There is no one righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10). "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 7:9).

Of all people Christians should care about the environment. This is our Father's world. We are responsible for it. The rivers, the trees, the fields are not ours, they are the Lord's. Now the earth is still groaning and moaning (Romans 8:22). Some day we will inhabit a perfect new earth. But this new planet will not come through human efforts, but through God's intervention. "We are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness" (2 Peter 3:13).

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