Work, Nature and Religion

Gregory Baum

In this brief article I wish to propose for reflection the following thesis: the abstract question about the attitude of 'a religion' - for instance, Christianity - toward 'nature' should be avoided.

The point I wish to make is that the attitude of people toward nature is always mediated through a particular culture and, more especially, through the aspect of that culture called 'work.' Thus agricultural societies have similar attitudes toward nature, and their religion, whatever it may be, will be marked by them.

Biblical scholars have suggested that the early parts of the Bible may well reflect the difficult passage of Israel from a loose federation of pastoral tribes to a more settled and stable agricultural society. At this crucial threshold people have to learn to do hard, regular, and systematic labour. The Creation Story in Genesis emphasizes the need to 'subdue' the earth - ploughing, sowing, planting, weeding, pruning, harvesting - and to exercise 'dominion' over the animals, that is, to tame animals for the barn yard to become the farmers' helpers.

Agricultural people have similar attitudes toward nature. On the one hand they intervene in nature, they transform nature by hard work to make it more fruitful; and on the other they honour nature, they are amazed by its mysterious power of birth and rebirth. Of course, the Israelites were prohibited from worshiping the forces of nature. But since they honoured it, they - like all agricultural societies - had codes that regulated and

Gregory Baum is Professor of Theological Ethics at the Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University.

restricted human interventions through labour. Respect for nature generates limits of what humans can do to it.

In the Bible the setting for agricultural work is God's creation. Work in the fields is doing God's will, work in the fields honours God; and God blesses this work. People turn to God in prayer to overcome their anxiety over possible irregularities of nature, such as unfavourable weather. Harvest festivals celebrate God's goodness, human industry, and nature's resources. In the Bible, nature itself, in all its variety, sings the praises of God.

These sections of the Bible are suspicious of cities. A recent book, published in Quebec, *Repères pour demain*, on the need for an ecological ethics (ed. A. Beauchamps, J. Harvey, Montreal: Bellarmin, 1988), contains an analysis of the attitude toward nature of Quebec society before the (late) arrival of industrialization. The source for this analysis was the song book, *La bonne chanson*, a collection of popular songs, reedited and republished every ten years, which for generations was used at public and private celebrations all over Quebec. These songs give poetic expression to the same agricultural relation to nature that we find in the Bible: hard work transforming nature and at the same time, respect and awe before nature, both related to the God of creation.

There is very little foundation for the idea proposed by some nineteenth-century German theologians, drawing upon important philosophical categories of their day, that there exists a radical distinction between 'history' and 'nature' and that biblical religion dealt with the former and not with the latter. This very discourse, I think, would be difficult to understand for agricultural people whose daily labour enhances the fruitfulness of nature. Their history is daily interwoven with nature.

Since the attitude toward nature is mediated through culture, especially the part of culture called work, it is not surprising that craftmen and merchants - whatever their religion - experience themselves at a much greater distance from nature than do agricultural workers. Their place is not the country but the town.

Nor is it surprising that the industrialization of the economy, a new, unprecedented phenomeon, produced an attitude toward nature for which there is no parallel in history. The place of the industries is the city. The great social critics of the nineteenth century analysed the alienation inflicted on workers by the factory system - including the alienation from nature.

The same critics also analysed the destructive impact of industrial capitalism on nature itself, especially on the land, the landscape, the lakes and the forests. Nature came to be looked upon as a factor of production. Labour (people) and land (nature) were treated as commodities: they were bought and sold, used, consumed and disposed of. Their value was determined by the market.

Needless to say, labour and land are not commodities, they are not the product of human industry. In a capitalist economy, they are commodities in a purely fictitious sense. Yet even Marx, the great critic of capitalism, proposed a labour theory of value which assigned no value at all to the natural resources.

Thanks to the pressure of the labour movement and progressive political parties, modern capitalist society has created many laws protecting workers from being treated as commodities. Yet there are far fewer laws that protect the land - nature - against the manipulation by market forces. One does not have to be a socialist to be deeply scandalized by the immorality of land speculation.

How did the Christian religion react to the transformation of land into merchandise and the subjugation of nature to market forces? Confronted with powerful cultural transformations, the inherited religion usually experiences conflicts and divisions. Thus there were Christians who rejoiced in the new order as progress and reflected very little on its impact on workers, community and land; and there were Christians, in dialogue with other critics, who lamented the arrival of the industrial city, the metropolis, and the extension of its ethos, including its purely utilitarian approach to nature, to society as a whole.

When J.S Woodsworth, one time Methodist minister who became the founder of the CCF, was arrested during the Winnipeg general strike of 1919, one of the subversive utterances of which he was accused was "The earth is the Lord's." In the Bible the land belonged to God: human ownership of land was provisional and conditional upon certain obligations.

The present ecological crisis reveals to us the failure of industrial society in all parts of the world - including Eastern Europe - to protect from pollution and destruction 'the land', that is, nature as the matrix of society's physical existence. Can this disintegration of nature be stopped? Today we witness the struggles undertaken by ecologically-oriented people (including Christians) and their organizations to bring modern society to its senses.

This, in my opinion, is the present historical context for a Christian theology of nature. The question is not what is the Christian attitude toward nature abstractly speaking. I am suggesting that people's attitude toward nature is largely mediated by their labour, by their economy. The task of religion is to react to this attitude, either by approving and refining it, or in other situations by denouncing it and favouring an alternative

organization of labour, one that generates a more responsible attitude toward nature.