Justice and the Integrity of Creation

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Prior to Lynn White's influential article of 1967, Christian theologians expressing concern for the environment were representative of a very small minority. Since 1967, and in particular the last decade, there has been a great proliferation in the body of Christian scholarship dealing with nature and the environment. These eco-theologians, having been confronted with the growing scientific evidence of the environmental crisis, are seeking to offer a Christian response to the present impasse. According to the accusation, popularized by White's article, that the modern exploitative approach towards nature has been caused in great part by a Christian anthropocentrism based in biblical teaching, it would seem at first that the Christian tradition is an unlikely place to seek a positive contribution towards the ecological crisis. The potential for a positive Christian contribution towards this crisis seems even more unlikely when it is considered that there exists much opposition among Christians towards the work of the eco-theologians.

In this article I wish to focus on the latter, namely those within the Christian community who have been voicing certain reservations and hesitancies towards a Christian involvement in environmental issues. I wish to take this opposition seriously because I have found that these fellow Christians do not express their reservations out of some vested interest in the despoliation of nature. Rather their opposition grows out of a concern for the neighbour, most often expressed in terms of an emancipatory commitment held on behalf of peoples who live in oppressed or marginalized situations. My thesis is

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that although there exist some seemingly fundamental points of confrontation between theologians dealing with ecological issues and those focusing on issues of social emancipation, there is evidence that out of this confrontation Christians can come to a better understanding of both the nature of oppression and the path of evangelical commitment.

The Response: A Theology of Nature

Christian scholars have taken several different approaches in responding to the ecological crisis. Much of the earlier scholarship was faced with the task of dealing with theological positions which legitimate environmental destruction. Such positions assert that, on the basis of Genesis 1:26-28, humanity has been commissioned by God to exploit and subdue the earth. Michael Granberg-Michaelson, a director in the World Council of Churches sub-unit on Church and Society, notes that "while this is still the starting point for many Christians, it is seldom argued any longer that God blesses the destruction of the Earth" (Granberg-Michaelson 12). A second approach focusses on humanity's need to use the earth's resources wisely, to be good caretakers and stewards of creation. This position places humanity in a managerial relationship towards nature and puts foreward environmental concern as a sound ethical value. While it seems evident that such a call for more responsible action is a necessary component of environmental concern, one must question whether such an approach addresses the full challenge presented by the global despoliation of the environment. By and large such an ethical value has already been embraced by dominant society in most of the developed nations. One has only to look at the success of the "blue box" recycling program carried out in most major urban centres in Canada to find evidence of this. Yet the dominant presence of environmental concern as an ethical value, while encouraging, has not radically challenged our

modern exploitative approach to nature; the movement towards the despoliation and physical death of the world continues. It seems that a more radical conversion towards the well-being of the natural world is required to meet the challenge of the ecological crisis. For this reason many eco-theologians have taken a third approach to the environmental crisis. This approach views the environmental crisis not primarily as an ethical issue but rather as a fundamental theological issue, that is, an issue which emanates from the centre of the faith and of the gospel message. Douglas John Hall has stated that only by viewing environmental concern as a fundamental outgrowth of evangelical faith and commitment can there be an efficacious Christian response to the ecological crisis:

> For once it is determined that the gospel is intended for the world and that the healing of the creation is its ultimate aim, the path of Christian obedience is perfectly clear: it must bring to bear all the considerable weight of the message of divine judgment and divine love on this world . . . all that threatens the life of the beloved *kosmos* must be named and rejected (Hall 38).

With this goal of clarifying the "path of Christian obedience" (Hall 38), most eco-theologians have dealt with the issue of environmental concern not simply as an ethical value but as concern which is rooted in evangelical commitment.

The process of developing a theology of nature is often carried out in two parts. The first part of the process stems from the critical self-reflection of Christian scholars and from the accusations of secular scholars that Christianity must share some complicity in the modern exploitative approach towards nature. Most eco-theologians have acknowledged that Christians have often

held indifferent and at times even hostile attitudes towards extra-human nature. In spite of these attitudes, those developing theologies of nature feel that concern for extra-human nature is a central and intrinsic aspect of the Christian gospel. The second part of the process is therefore to try to retrieve those aspects of the Christian faith which emphasize the inherent value of the world beyond its utility for humanity - a value which exists because of the world's relationship with the Creator. Often these retrieved doctrines, symbols and metaphors of the faith serve to focus on the immanence of God in the world. An emphasis on God's immanence in the world helps to counteract the influential Enlightenment image of God as a detached and disinterested clock maker and instead focuses on God's intimate relationship with, and concern for, the world.

Critics of a Theology of Nature

Those expressing reservations about theologies of nature are most often critical of this final approach to the ecological issue. Many are deeply distrustful of attempts to state that environmental concern is central to evangelical commitment, and fear that the work of justice will be compromised because of the emphasis placed on environmental concern. Some of the earliest opposition towards theologies of nature arose among European theologians responding out of their neo-orthodox tradition. Because of the modern attempt to demystify nature, many theologies of nature state that in response to the ecological crisis it is important to recognize once again the religious significance of nature. Some European theologians find such language of recognizing the immanence of God, the presence of the infinite in finite structures, to be dangerously reminiscent of the language used by nineteenth- century romantics. They find that the romantic spirit, with its tendency towards authoritarianism and its inability in the end to distinguish

between the finite and the infinite, has an affinity to the spirit of fascism. Joseph Sittler, a Lutheran theologian and a pioneer of environmental concern in North America, noted that among some of his European colleages "'nature' is regarded as a dirty word . . . evoking Wagnerian visions of Rhine-maidens, and redolent of Wolfgang Von Goethe" (Sittler 256). This opposition to a resurgence in romanticism is indicative of much of the opposition towards theologies of nature.

Gregory Baum, a theologian and an ethicist in dialogue with sociology, has in a recent book review expressed his reservations with regard to much of the work that has been done on theologies of nature. Baum finds much of the scholarship dealing with eco-theology to be too idealistic, especially where this scholarship tries to address the accusation that the Christian tradition has contributed towards the modern exploitative view of nature. Baum finds that by focussing on the "cultural" roots of the ecological crisis, the material and economic factors escape significant criticism. It is in capitalism (and in socialism, insofar as socialism has not liberated itself from the ideology of limitless growth) with its emphasis on the maximization of profit and production that Baum finds the roots of the ecological crisis. Approaching the physical world from the perspective of maximization ultimately "transforms nature into commodities and left-over garbage" (Baum 46).

A critique of religious and cultural contributions to the ecological crisis is still valid and necessary insofar as "modern society, bent on maximization, made use of cultural traditions, including the biblical symbols, to legitimate the domination and exploitation of nature" (Baum 46). An investigation of these cultural contributions that is not preceded by an analysis of material factors in the environmental crisis is unacceptable. Liberation theologians have brought up the concern that a theology of nature developed by the

wealthy and those in power could be used to further the economic oppression of the poor. The emphasis in theologies of nature on the image of God as Creator, a God who has ordered the world from the beginning and continues to sustain and maintain this universal order is particularly troubling for liberation theologians. Out of their analysis, liberation theologians have found that present structures, rather than being a reflection of God's grace, work to disenfranchise the poor and maintain their oppression. Environmental concern thus appears to them as a means of legitimating the present structure of oppression and of denying the poor the benefits of technology and industrialization. For many of the poor as well environmental concern simply appears to be a luxury which is beyond their means. Cesar Vallejo, in reflecting on the attitude of the poor towards the environment, has said that "persons who search for bones and scraps in a dump site are unable to appreciate the created order: what they yearn for is deliverance" (Rajote 87).

Feminist theologians share some similar concerns with liberation theologians about theologies of nature. With regard to the appeal among eco-theologians to the image of God as Creator, Dorothee Sölle and Shirley Cloyes write:

> Creation faith is susceptible to the danger of "cheap reconciliation," whereby we are asked to live as if we did not require freeing from present, unjust orders, as if the presumption of a universal transhistorical order were sufficient in itself for human life, and as if the God of nature had triumphed over the God of history (Sölle 10).

Further there is a fear that environmental concern could encourage and legitimate a romanticized view of women in society. Women, like other dominated peoples, can be seen as "bearers of unalienated nature" (Ruether 85), idealized images of what white males are lacking. This idealized image of women could also be considered

another form of biological determinism, a method of justifying women's roles in society according to their physical attributes, primarily their ability to bear children.

What all these theologians have in common is that they recognize that the work for justice and the work to end the domination of extra-human nature may come into conflict. They fear that the language of eco-theology will be used to legitimate present structures, and that a focus on God's immanence in nature will cause us to lose sight of the historical/cultural struggle for the liberation of marginalized peoples. Using the language of liberation theology, one extreme position would suggest that it is not possible to hold both a preferential option for the poor and a preferential option for extra-human nature without compromising the work of one or the other. The assertion by eco-theologians that the environmental crisis is primarily a theological issue, an issue at the heart of Christian faith and evangelical commitment, appears to be at the basis of this conflict with those who have a fundamental commitment to human liberation.

Fortunately, it seems that these concerns are not mutually exclusive. It is true that there are some eco-theologians who have little interest in human emancipation and there are some with an emancipatory commitment who feel that environmental concern will distract them from their work for justice. Nevertheless, there are many who share both concerns.

Response to the Impasse

Because of these shared concerns, theologians have been working to find a response to this impasse. What they have found is that attempts to maintain a division between the emphasis on preserving the creation and the work for justice do not adequately take into consideration the relationship between the domination of extra-human nature and social domination. On the one hand, it has been demonstrated that the poor and marginalized are the most affected by and least able to protect themselves against the ecological crisis. In a study carried out by the United Church of Christ (USA) it was found that "the racial composition of a community is the single variable best able to explain the existence or non-existence of commercial hazardous waste facilities in that area" (Lee 24). Further evidence suggests that marginalized groups and persons have a greater likelihood of being exposed to hazardous working conditions due to environmental despoliation. Also, they are often the first to have their economic capability diminished by the destruction of natural resources.

On the other hand, theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether argues that the exploitation of nature is often carried out through a system of social exploitation. Ruether suggests that in order for some to be comfortable and maintain an economic and social advantage, others have had to carry out the work of dominating and controlling the world. It is the poor, the working classes, women, and people of colour who work in the mines, fields, forests, and factories. Furthermore, poverty places a strain on natural resources as the poor are left without the luxury of following a principle of sustainable development. When "basic needs and survival itself are at stake . . . poverty causes . . . them [the poor] to exploit and eventually destroy the environment that is supporting them as they seek food, fuel and shelter" (Rajotte 17). Such evidence suggests that nature and human history are

not autonomous but rather exist in a dialectical relationship, each one affecting and in turn being affected by the other.

The understanding that nature and human history exist in something of a dialectical relationship has significance for both those with a concern for nature and those with a concern for human oppression. For those expressing an environmental concern, a recognition of this relationship between nature and human history militates against attempts to romanticize nature. Any attempt to abandon human historical struggles in order to return to a supposedly pure and unviolated natural world can be countered by evidence which demonstrates that nature too partakes in human historical and cultural development. Unfortunately it has been the environmental crisis which has helped to highlight this inextricable relationship between nature and human activity. It is now known that there is no part of the biosphere which has not been at least partially despoiled by human misdevelopment. Using theological language it is possible to say that nature like human history is fallen and affected by sin. It is not sinful in and of itself but it has been affected by sinful human structures and distorted by human activity.

For those holding an emancipatory commitment, an understanding of the relationship between nature and history furthers the understanding of the nature of oppression. Feminist theologians in their attempt to describe the relationship between the modern exploitative approach to nature and social domination, have contributed to the discussion the metaphor of all oppression existing as a "web." Feminist critique has long revealed the relationship between the oppression of women and the degradation of nature. This metaphor of a web helps to further the understanding that "all forms of domination, oppression and violence are linked together, and that the struggle for change is one struggle . . . . Wherever human beings are violated, exploited or abused

the integrity of creation is broken" (Rajotte 87). From this metaphor we can better understand that a concern for the neighbour must necessarily include concern for the environment. The integrity of creation can be violated through the oppression of both human and extra-human nature.

What then has been the result of this meeting between concern for human and extra-human nature? First, the recognition that there can be no sharp distinction made between a concern for the environment and a concern for human emancipation is bringing about a heightened awareness and a sharpened perception of the nature of oppression. It appears that the domination of human and extra-human nature are linked. The task of gaining a fuller understanding of this relationship and its implications is making new intellectual demands on theologians and is calling forth new forms of analysis. Second, the understanding that the integrity of creation can be violated through the domination of both human and extra-human nature is helping to clarify for many the path of evangelical commitment. It seems that through this meeting of concern for human and extra-human nature, some are coming to acknowledge forms of opression which they previously did not recognize. Whatever the starting point, those who have been led to the conviction that the domination of both human and extra-human is an affront to God's will for the creation and human existence are faced with a new challenge - the challenge to join together the work of defending the environment and that of establishing justice. The call of Christian discipleship must necessarily be to the well-being of the whole world - both that of human and of extra-human nature.

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