

Land: Source and Recipient of Justice

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Introduction

No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions. The proof that conservation has not yet touched these foundations of conduct lies in the fact that philosophy and religion have not yet heard of it. In our attempt to make conservation easy, we have made it trivial (Steinhacker and Flader 92).

These words were written in the latter part of the 1940s by Aldo Leopold, one of the pioneers of the American conservation movement. They express a profound disappointment in the lack of interest in the ecological and environmental state of affairs in philosophical and theological circles of that day.

Concern about nature has been slow in coming to the theological sphere but in the years that have passed since Leopold penned those words some theologians have been discussing and writing about environmental issues, the ecological crisis and humanity's relationship with nature. It is still not a major issue for many people in the churches but awareness about the problems facing God's creation is growing.

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Theologians and theological ethicists have recently been providing Christians and others with written resources to enable them to think theologically about nature and our world. Some have been attempts to defend Christianity from the attack of environmentalists who believe that much of our current crisis is a direct result of a Christian doctrine of dominion and control over nature. Others like H. Paul Santmire have produced works interpreting Christianity's historical roots in a theology of nature. Still others like Douglas J. Hall have worked to provide theological concepts and symbols that will be useful in discussing and determining the relationship of human and non-human nature.

This paper will attempt to follow the third example and will consider briefly two related theological concepts which will be helpful in doing a theology of nature. Both of these ideas, "the Sabbatical Year" and "Jubilee," arise from the theology of the land as it is found in the Scriptures. Both are justice-oriented.

Land can mean different things to people coming from varied backgrounds and presuppositions. For the purposes of this paper *land* will be used in earthy, concrete terms. It is the soil from which life grows, particularly that which is used for agricultural purposes. While defining land in this practical way it is also fruitful if it conveys a more symbolic meaning encompassing all that the land produces and supports, the fullness of God's creation. Land in this way is a representative part of nature.

Two Campaigns

In dealing with environmental issues there has been conflict at times between groups which are striving for seemingly different ends. As Arthur Simon in *Bread for the World* says,

In reality *two* environmental campaigns are going on. One centers primarily on protecting nature and its ecosystems. The second concerns itself with social ecosystems that produce hunger, disease, and crowded hovels. . . .

The first campaign is being waged by those who are not so poor, some of whom are more indignant about smog than about slums, more worried about the mistreatment of animals and lakes than about mistreated people. This tends to pit the rights of nature against human rights. . . .

The poor of the world would probably like to breathe better air and keep their waterways pure, if they had decent jobs and enough to eat. But pollution-free hunger does not appeal to them (Simon 47-48).

These two campaigns must go together. Justice for nature, especially in terms of justice for the land and justice for humanity, are intertwined. One cannot successfully be achieved without the other. Human and non-human nature are part of God's creation together in relationship. In this relationship they must be upheld and affirmed together.

Abuse of Land

The history of humanity has been a history of disparity among people in terms of worldly goods: the earth's resources. It has been a story of wealth and poverty - the rich and the poor. At the base of this division of wealth is land. Land has always been used as a means of generating capital and from capital, power.

Various systems of land tenure have been instituted throughout the centuries and, almost without exception, those who could consolidate and accumulate land became wealthy. Those who were wealthy owned and controlled both quantity and quality of land and used that foundation to amass more. The poor had the least and the worst land and little chance to change their lives or the pattern of land and wealth distribution. It has been a vicious circle which has rarely been broken peacefully.

Land tenure systems with the same features exist around the world today. They are especially noticeable in the developing countries of the Third World but similar patterns are now emerging in the American and Canadian West.

During the last century, in addition to being used to garner wealth and oppress others, the land itself became the object of humanity's abuse. In some ways this has been accidental: the pressure to survive in farming and the use of farming practices which unknowingly was harmful to the soil have been the root of many negative procedures. The perennial human problems of greed, indifference and fear have also played a role in the misuse of land.

Soil degradation is one of the major illnesses of nature today. The degree to which the soil has deteriorated over the last one hundred years in all parts of the world will have serious consequences for the survival of the creation both human and non-human. The facts concerning top-soil erosion in North America alone are staggering. Clifford Cobb says that one-third of the top-soil on this continent has been carried away by erosion (Cobb 65).

Secular Attitudes to Land

While Christian doctrine is sometimes held accountable for the abuse of nature and land secular attitudes also deserve their share of the blame. The underlying idea here is that land is a thing. There is little or no sense that humans and the land are both part of a larger creation - living in a created and ongoing relationship. The land is here for people to use as they see fit. It is an object upon which humanity acts out its will.

As R.W.G. Bryant points out, North American attitudes are greatly influenced by the "frontier ethic." This ethic maintains the right of the individual to own land and to do whatever one wants with it (Bryant 3). There is a real problem in the North American psyche in dealing with issues that interfere with private property. "The snail's pace of the psychological adjustment to changing material conditions is partly due to the almost religious nature of the concept of private property" (Bryant 5).

Theology of Land

In the Bible the land is a gift from God to the people of Israel but not a gift that is given without very specific requirements: a covenant. It is a three-way covenant, for it is no longer just God and his people, as Walter Brueggemann points out, but God "and his people and his land" (Brueggemann 6).

In 1984 the General Council of the United Methodist Church (U.S.A.) adopted a resolution entitled "Agricultural and Rural Life Issues." Part of the first section provides an excellent summary:

Several basic biblical themes repeat themselves regarding nature and the land: God is the owner of

the land (Lev. 25), thus it is a gift in covenant which involves the stewardship of keeping and tending the land for present and future generations; as God's creation it has rights and needs, the need to be regenerated that it may sustain life and be a place of joy; and it is a corporate gift to all humanity requiring just patterns of land use (Bushwick 28).

The land was not just something to be used. The land had rights. Every seventh year the land was to have its Sabbath, a year of rest. In this sabbatical year there was to be no sowing of fields nor pruning of vines. What was produced naturally however could be used for food by anyone who wished it (Leviticus 25:1-7).

Another radical feature of land use was the year of the Jubilee. In the fiftieth year all land was to revert to its original recipients even though the title had been lost for various reasons such as famine or poverty (Leviticus 25:8-18).

As Emilio Castro, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, demonstrates, Jesus brings this concept forward into New Testament thought:

If we look more closely at the Old Testament references, in Jesus' teaching about the kingdom - and in particular at his manifesto in Luke 4: "to announce the acceptable year of the Lord" - we will discern a direct reference to the teaching of the Old Testament on the Jubilee Year, that moment once in every fifty years when the land was redistributed and when every family, every tribe had the chance of a new beginning (Arias 33).

Two Concepts for Justice

The ideas of Jubilee and the sabbatical year address the twin concerns of justice for people and for the land. It is not only the concepts themselves that need to be brought forward and applied to the present day situation but also, even more importantly, their underlying principles.

According to the law set down by God as the people of Israel came into the Promised Land the land was to be left fallow every seventh year. This allowed the land to regenerate from the previous six years of work. It can be seen from a practical standpoint as a year when top-soil and minerals re-build and the water content of the soil increases.

One of the rationales behind this guideline is the requirement to care for the land. The land is not something which can be depleted for humanity's use without any thought for its own well-being. The health of the soil was of primary importance to God.

This conviction needs to be set alongside the societal view of land as a thing which can be used at will physically and economically. There is a desperate need for people to see land as a part of creation which has rights and needs of its own separate from those which are oriented to the human.

The sabbatical year was also a provision for the poor whereby they could go into the fallow fields and use whatever happened to be growing voluntarily. This was part of God's plan that Israel should be a land of justice for all who lived within its bounds.

J.H. Yoder defines the Jubilee as having four prescriptions: "1) leaving the soil fallow, 2) the remission

of debts, 3) the liberation of slaves, 4) the return to each individual of his family's property" (Yoder 64).

With regard to justice for the land the Jubilee contained within it the sabbatical year guidelines. The major feature of the second and fourth precept, pertinent to this discussion, is that the Jubilee did not allow the accumulation of land. Every fifty years there was a redistribution of God's gift which was the wealth-producing resource of the nation.

It is with the accumulation of too much land that the land is abused. It becomes the way to wealth instead of the source of living for the family and benefit for the community. When this relationship between people and the land changes stewardship and caring for God's gift also changes. Under those circumstances land becomes an object instead of a partner in creation and life.

The Jubilee principle needs to be put forward to speak to contemporary societal attitudes concerning the land as object, the inviolability of private property and the notion that technology is supreme.

In recent years there has been an increasing awakening to the possibility of applying these Jubilee edicts. One suggestion has been to forgive the overwhelming debt incurred by Third World countries over the last several decades. It seems impossible for them to get out from under the tremendous load they now carry. Another proposal has been to apply this axiom to the current debt crisis of farmers in Canada and the United States.

Conclusion

A paper of this length is useful in bringing forth ideas for consideration. It can neither outline full plans of action nor exhaustively explore the concepts that it

highlights. It can challenge others to reflect upon possibilities for new ways of thinking and action.

Jubilee and the sabbatical year for the land are ideas that can creatively speak to the attitudes and practices of modern society. The resulting tension is not going to be easy to resolve. Mortimer Arias provides a reminder that "while we walk with this experience and this hope, we are called to evoke, to provoke and to try temporary and partial jubilees, 'moments of justice' here and there" (Arias 48).

There is justice for the land in the relationship of people and land that comes from equitable distribution. People care for the land that cares for them. Justice for the people comes from the land that will support them and allow them to live free, uncoerced lives, providing for themselves in relationship with God's creation.

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