

Theological Amnesia and the Ecological Crisis

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In this article I wish to reflect on what I perceive to be a loss of memory among many North American Christians. Describing this lapse in remembrance as *theological amnesia*, I will delineate the implications of this amnesia as it manifests itself in the context of the nuclear-ecological crisis.

With respect to the subject of remembrance it appears that I like most human creatures have a better recollection of stories told in my teen-age years than of yesterday's weather forecast. One such childhood parable which captures the thesis of this essay comes from the experience of a pastor in a United Church in southern Ontario. Among this minister's many duties was the task of visiting a senior's residence on the edge of the parish village. A tragic collection of individuals made their home in this institution. Most suffered from amnesia or what we have now identified as Alzheimer's disease. Nevertheless this faithful servant would go there to listen to complaints, offer intercessions and administer the sacrament of holy communion.

One morning he arrived to find the hallways in a tumult. Nurses, residents, orderlies, doctors and administrators were all running in and out of rooms frantically looking, searching for false teeth. Not just one set of dentures, they were hunting for everyone's false teeth. It seemed that someone or something had stealthily crept through all of the patients' rooms and removed the

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false teeth from the proverbial glass beside the bed. No one had any teeth with which to eat.

While the pastor was there they did not apprehend the culprit nor locate the teeth, but soon after a cache of many dozens of dentures was uncovered beneath the mattress of a senile woman. While she may have lost her mind, apparently this person had not lost her agility nor her kleptomania. She had forgotten her night-time escapade and went about with everyone else foraging for the missing teeth. This was serious, as all loss of memory is, but what became more disconcerting was that no one could identify their own teeth. Hence the residence authorities organized an assembly at which everyone tried on a pair of teeth. It took some while for all the trades and try-outs to finish. A few kind souls were not entirely satisfied with the result of this meeting and so for many weeks after, because people still could not recall precisely what their teeth looked and felt like, it was not uncommon for two residents to exchange teeth, sometimes mid-meal, complaining: "This doesn't fit. Here, try mine."

In this bizarre incident there is a message for those people living in the present nuclear-ecological crisis. How discomfiting and disorienting it is when a people loses its memory. My thesis is that the North American culture and particularly many manifestations of the Christian tradition on this continent suffer from a similar loss of memory and that this amnesia has disastrous consequences for the planet's ecology.

In general terms I would argue that as a people we have forgotten the feel of truth, truth about ourselves as creatures and truth about the fate of the earth. Even while living with a cultivated amnesia we are unconsciously aware of the pain and dislocation associated with any serious attempt to recover our collective memory. The anticipation of that discomfort dissuades us from searching diligently for self-awareness or

world-awareness. Contending that this forgetfulness has both "secular" and theological dimensions, I will argue below that our consumptive and possessive life-styles depend for their survival on the forgetting of certain fundamental principles of healthy living.

When I suggest that the North American culture or its once "nominal" religion has lost its memory of truth I am not simply speculating that there is an inability to identify empirical data. Quite the contrary: in the age of the microchip and the megabyte most citizens are overwhelmed with raw facts. But we have lost the capacity to discern within that avalanche of information and sensory stimulation that which brings life to the created order, that which speaks of the wholeness of human life, that which reflects God's shalom and that which establishes justice and peace.

I have not lived long enough to determine whether this society suffers from absent-mindedness, a benign and temporary condition, or if this predicament of memory-loss is progressing towards something more permanent like a collective amnesia or a neurotic state of social repression. Either way I sense that our psychic and perhaps physical health is presently in grave danger because of this loss of the capacity to remember.

While I make the distinction between a "secular" and Christian or theological version of amnesia, they are inextricably intertwined in the North American context. Hence it would be false to lay at the feet of Christian thinking (or should I say Christian forgetting) all the blame for the ecological crisis. As Hall explains quite well (Hall 25), the tradition of Jerusalem is not solely to blame for the cavalier and often detached attitude with which western culture treats nature. Nevertheless there are certainly connections between the lack of memory found in North American society in general and that discernible within the Christian tradition of this context. There exists

what might be called a symbiotic relationship between the two versions of forgetfulness. I propose to outline three sources of our amnesia about the ecology, each of which has a secular and sacred dimension. First, there is the pressure of a particular understanding of history, one based upon the assumption of progress and the assurance of providence. This interpretation of history has dominated the spirit of American life in this century and its general acceptance has led to a dangerous disregard for ecological concerns. In the second place, I highlight an economic principle of specialization which when combined with traditional Christian dualism leads to a collective loss of memory that devalues and discourages a healthy attitude toward the environment. Finally it has been suggested that North Americans suffer from an increasing anxiety over the apparent inability of human creatures to seriously curb the threat of an ecological-nuclear crisis.

This anxiety leads to a protective forgetfulness that when joined with a doctrine of God which accentuates divine omnipotence can result in a detached indifference to the plight of the earth.

Progress and Providence

George Grant argued in his marvelous book *Philosophy in the Mass Age* that this society has history beyond the age of progress. That is, I believe, a profound insight. Grant suggests that as a people we have no recollection of a time before social and political optimism. Within the historical parameters of our North American existence it is practically impossible to contemplate an age when everything and everyone did not "live happily ever after." Because we have no collective consciousness of the plague, the 30 Years War, the Crusades or the Inquisition, we cannot remember the dark side of the human condition with any authenticity. Coming to the "new" world our

ancestors sought to create a society where all these discouraging and destructive shadows of life were banished, where poverty, strife and oppression were eradicated. North America was to be the city set upon the hill and its people were to be, as Niebuhr alleged, the "children of light." Under the guise of an ethic of progress it is naturally assumed that each passing day brings greater achievements, more choices, improved luxury, enlarged wealth and increased happiness. That was and remains the essence of the American dream, a dream which breaks from the determinism of past social and religious structures and posits infinite potentiality and growth, which promises a world of self-authenticating progress.

In the Christian theological world the corollary to the secular ideology of progress is a peculiarly North American version of the doctrine of providence. It has been assumed from the inception of colonial times that, regardless of what the aboriginal peoples thought, God foreordained this land to be the location for the long-awaited kingdom. God's providence was therefore actively arranging human lives and social events in such a way as to ensure this result. The very fabric of white community life was woven according to the assumption of a providential destiny. In this spirit former U.S. president Ronald Reagan proclaimed in 1980 at the outset of his tenure in office: "I believe the American people have the greatest capacity for great deeds of any people on Earth . . . I believe in their greatness and I believe this country has a destiny" (Scheer 260).

Beginning with preachers like Jonathan Edwards the vision of America as the providentially guided nation was elaborated into what is now recognized as the tradition of millennialism. Edwards declared: "The latter day glory is probably to begin in America" (Marty 265). Henry Ward Beecher gave voice to this tradition when he construed "progress in science and morality as the coming Kingdom

of God" (Marsden 24). While the assumption of providential destiny became one of the cornerstones of much liberal thought and action it is no way confined to the left side of the theological spectrum. Though not as optimistic as Beecher or Edwards evangelists like Jerry Falwell and authors like Hal Lindsey make similar claims for God's special choice of the American people. In the latter's books God has chosen Americans to be a faithful remnant who will prevail during the impending destruction of the planet. In either its liberal or conservative manifestations the logic is consistent: God's plans are unfolding in the current history of the American people. Every event has significance as it fulfills an emerging destiny.

The ironic flaw with either the ideology of progress or the assumption of providence is that they can be believed only to the extent in which they embrace the very psychological and sociological posture which they claim to oppose, that is, determinism. They are credible only when people single-mindedly disregard the ambiguities of their lives and through a deterministic spirit impose a veneer of improvement and purpose on what is otherwise a confusing and often disappointing existence. Only as one ignores the darkness, the mistakes or errors of history is one able to believe the assumption of progress and the assurance of providence. Moreover since both concepts are forward-looking and prone to optimism neither contains a capacity for critical historical reflection, for the articulation or imposition of limits to human behaviour. In the end they foster an illusory lifestyle, one governed more by the whims of Madison Avenue than the realistic needs of human living.

The maintenance of the illusion is costly in social terms because it involves the masking of oppression and poverty. Those who cannot progress, whose lives are not blessed by providence, those who are homeless or unemployed, are labeled as "failures" and "misfits." Left

behind by the ever-enlightened and enlightening march of history these marginalized people are regarded as aberrations of a basically healthy social project rather than as living signs of its imminent decay. In psychological terms the assumption of providentially guided progress entails the suppression of anxiety and despair. With respect to ecological issues the dream of divinely ordained, unlimited growth requires that society relativize the mounting problems of pollution. After brief media coverage ecological disasters like oil spills and toxic waste emissions must be forgotten if the dream is to be preserved. Under the influence of progress and providentialism, people feel inclined to chase away or suppress the dark names mentioned in last night's news, Chernobyl, St. Basil le Grand, The Exxon Valdez, or Three Mile Island. To remember such events would not only require great intellectual courage, it would necessitate a re-allocation of personal and public priorities. Quite frankly, in the culture of narcissism (Christopher Lasch) a healthy and courageous memory is troublesome and not cost-efficient.

Specialization and Christian Dualism

This brings us to my second point. While some of our forgetfulness is rooted in the admixture of the paradigms of progress and providence it cannot be denied that another factor which feeds into the collective amnesia of this culture is economic in origin. As was the case in the previous section, an economically induced amnesia has both its secular and religious dimensions.

Beginning with the secular dimension it is essential to recognize a certain direction within the organization of labour on this continent. There is a movement toward greater technical specialization with a commensurate drop in the creative and inspirational dimensions of a

labourer's efforts. The theory is that the more *taylorized* one's productive role becomes, the more rapidly goods and services can be produced and the less disruptive is the loss of any specific labourer.

Far from reversing this regrettable loss of control and creativity, computer technology simply exacerbates this situation (Menzies 209-210). Now the machine literally has the brains, knows the procedures and makes the decisions. The worker simply watches the functioning machine and feeds it the raw materials for manufacture. The increase in speed of manufacturing brings about a commensurate growth in profit margins and hence, a more efficient expansion of imperial strength and influence.

I will admit that this is a rudimentary analysis, but it is nonetheless valid. Whatever else one can report about the North American context one can at least state without too much fear of contradiction that the bottom line, the profit margin, is what powers our economy. Hence specialization is not coincidental to the North American life-style, but the fruit of an economic system which places its priority on profits rather than people.

The principle of specialization tends quite naturally to accentuate the importance of technique while reducing serious reflection on substance. A resultant utilitarian mentality - the cornerstone of American pragmatism - has become the basic cultural philosophy orienting most life choices in this society. To put it simply, the question of "Why?" is never asked since we are all too busy asking "How?" and, increasingly, "How much?"

What seems evident is that specialization, for whatever reason, has crept into many aspects of daily life and become the *modus operandi* of countless human actions. It has eroded both our capacity to remember and our memories. The most obvious example of this process of

erosion is in the field of employment. Our social structures have become so complex that most of us spend our times toiling over smaller and smaller problems, knowing more and more about less and less. Hence the economic principle of taylorization leads to a social specialization which fosters an endemic isolation or alienation of worker from worker, of worker from self and of worker from a holistic interpretation of reality. Using the example of a computerized manufacturing work-place, it is evident that the isolated workers lose sight of the larger picture into which their productive efforts fit.

Recently a worker at the G.M. plant in Oshawa told me that his job was to check the back fenders of cars as they went into the fully automated paint shop. Apparently his task was to examine them for blemishes and to tick the side of any that were defective with a piece of chalk. Because he could sit down his was considered to be a "cushy" job.

Nevertheless he confessed that he could not survive in that environment without "hanging up his mind on the coat rack at home before going out to work each morning." Earning his living became an exercise in forgetting everything, even his own identity. His work did not involve a collective effort to create automobiles for the pleasure of his community and friends. His remunerative life was reduced to defective bumpers. For eighteen dollars an hour he sold his body as an extension of the piece of chalk. Essentially his job was a highly specialized form of slavery, a form which, enhanced by the efficiency of computerization, is replicated in a growing number of employment settings. That auto employee speculated that "the name of the game is forgetting. If you can't tune out while you work, you'll go crazy."

There was nothing to indicate that this particular individual was *not* a well-rounded, well-read *remembering* human being outside of work. But surely when one's labour, that which orients one's waking hours, becomes mindless or banal it must have significant effects on that which is thought, desired or remembered outside of the shift at the plant or the office.

Under the constraints of this specialization of labour and its demand for mindlessness is it not possible to argue that people are less able to make judgements? Quite simply they have a meagre base of information and memory from which to respond to world events along with an underdeveloped capacity to discern the truth. In this state of affairs political decisions, social actions and ecological choices are all made on the basis of a dwindling capacity to reflect, to weigh events in the light of past circumstances.

For Christian theology this secular loss of memory induced by taylorization would be abhorrent if it were not for its persistently dualistic anthropology. While it may not be the only way of expressing the doctrine of humanity many Christian thinkers have maintained that human life on this earth at best is to be tolerated and at worst is to be despised. Reading such passages as 1 Corinthians 7:31 ("Those who have to deal with the world should not become engrossed in it"), or 1 John 2: 15 ("You must not love this passing world"), or James 4:4 ("Don't you realize that making the world your friend is making God your enemy"), the Christian may be persuaded to believe that serious contemplation on the earth, its history or prospects for survival, is a questionable affair. The spirit of such biblical texts leads naturally to the assumption that the true Christian vocation is the avoidance of worldly matters and the preparation of the soul for heavenly life. Thomas à Kempis gave classical expression to this now traditional dualism when he wrote:

All that is in this world is vanity This is the most noble and the most excellent wisdom that may be in any creature, by despising of this world to draw nearer and nearer to the kingdom of heaven (Thomas à Kempis 4).

Under the influence of this other-worldly orientation much classical Christian thought assumed that God did not make human beings in the divine image in order that creatures dwell upon the fate of the earth. The physical world and the concerns of this life are shadows, disappointing illusions of the glory that is to come. Hence any real energy lavished on the problems of carnal existence is suspect. Even though I have presented a rather caricatured version of Christian dualism, the basic logic holds true. Salvation is an ultramundane concept and consequently life on this planet is not of ultimate concern (Tillich) to creatures or Creator. The final result of such a dualistic anthropology and its concomitant soteriology is that its adherents forget the connectedness of humanity with the earth. Explaining the difference between native spirituality and the white man's religion, one native leader comments:

The Indian and the white man sense things differently because the white man has put distance between himself and nature; assuming a lofty place in the scheme of things has lost for him both reverence and understanding And here I find the great distinction between the faith of the Indian and the white man. Indian faith sought the harmony of man with his surroundings; the other sought the dominance of surroundings (Hart 50).

The combination of taylorization and anthropological dualism is formidable. The collective lack of historical memory brought about by a specialization of work and life when linked to an other-worldly spirituality creates a situation which gives free reign to an exploitation of

natural resources and the wanton waste of the earth's richness. There is neither a secular incentive nor religious inclination to look beyond the small confines of one's hard disk or T.V. monitor. The ravaging of the earth's resources required by the mushrooming "needs" of the world's elite is ignored. We have no ear to hear the groaning of creation because in a highly isolated and specialized world we cannot remember how or where to begin listening.

The current events involving the low level flying of NATO supersonic jet fighters in Labrador, or "Nitassinan" as native people call it, is a case in point. The memory of the white, privileged races is so brief. How poignant and revealing it is that native leaders take action to preserve the land that white people call the "True North Strong and Free." They risk arrest to protect its ecology against the ravages of war preparation and call the Canadian people of the earth to a different rhythm. The white population, caught with an amnesia about their connectedness to the earth and its life cycle, continues to ignore the warning of the Innu and other stewards of God's creation.

The Threat of the Ecological-Nuclear Crisis: Psychic Numbing and Divine Omnipotence

The topic of war preparations brings me to the third way in which our collective memory has been damaged. There is no better example of the collective, cultivated amnesia of North American society than Hiroshima. We "remember" our dead on November 11th but a Hiroshima day is non-existent. A decade ago, before the exposure given to Hiroshima on its fortieth anniversary, no one had ever heard of Hiroshima Day. August 6th, if noteworthy at all, was best known for its proximity to the Ontario long weekend at the beach.

Robert Lifton, a psychiatrist who interviewed many of the survivors of Hiroshima, claims that we avoid remembering that event because we unconsciously sense that honest recollection of the bombing implies assuming a burden of responsibility for it. Furthermore in his work *Indefensible Weapons* he maintains that all the survivors of the first nuclear blast, that is, everyone reading this article, are currently experiencing some of the same emotional and spiritual pressures as the surviving inhabitants of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He describes a psychological state in which many of the residents, overwhelmed by the devastation and suffering from severe physical and emotional shock, became numb to all feeling and thinking. The magnitude of the destruction was such a threat that their minds, their psyches and spirits, in a last desperate attempt to preserve sanity, basically shut down.

Lifton calls this defence mechanism "psychic numbing." On the basis of this data the U.S. psychiatrist speculates that one of the prerequisites for nuclear war is the psychological preparation for it. The human spirit must take a certain beating and become numb in order to render it capable of contemplating the annihilation of the species. North Americans, as Lifton argues, are already suffering the affects of this numbing process, even before the bombs go off or the planet becomes unlivable.

In her book, *The Arms Race Kills Even Without War*, Dorothee Sölle proposes a similar thesis. In the preparation for war one begins by killing the human spirit and this is accomplished through the sacrifice of memory. Sölle argues that the bomb induces us to forget, to forget the tremendous obligation which we have to past generations to keep faith with their achievements, dreams and projects. The psychic ecology of *homo sapiens* must be polluted before collective suicide can be contemplated seriously. The first step in this contamination is the loss of memory, a pre-emptive, self-imposed numbing.

Survivors of nuclear technology, living in the empire which is daily building and making serious its threat to use nuclear weapons, learn to forget, learn to remember less, expect less and believe less.

A similar memory loss could be discerned in the public debate surrounding the ecological crisis. Disasters are so immense, pollution is so pervasive, that sensitive human creatures develop calluses on their powers of recollection. They choose not to know, not to recognize the disintegration of creation. While it is a much slower process, the pollution of the earth's ecology elicits the same variety of amnesia and this forgetfulness weakens the collective resolve to prevent the destruction of the earth's environment through pollution.

A corresponding amnesia to that induced by the enormity of the ecological-nuclear crisis is evident in an accentuation of one attribute of the divine omnipotence. Put in a rather stark fashion I am suggesting that some Christians in the North American context are kept from remembering the fate of the earth because the God they have conceptualized or imagined will not let them remember. According to the imperial images upon which we have fashioned our *imago dei*, God is triumphant, successful, all-powerful, the mighty King who controls the world and who looks down upon all the poor fools who dwell on the parched soil and who has pity on us.

In this God we can remember the good times. We think back to the moments when faith worked, when the church triumphed. Such a God does not incite believers to recall the lost times, the broken hopes, the blasted dreams, the bent bodies, the ravaged forests and toxic streams. In the midst of the ecological-nuclear crisis Christians resort to the "Sky God" (Gore Vidal) as a final solution to impending disaster singing heartily, "He's got the whole world in his hands." Such a "high" doctrine of God is a

hindrance to a faithful remnant who remember albeit vaguely that God approached this "whole world" through self-sacrifice and addressed the plight of the earth from the unenviable position of the cross. If the remembrance of that earthy, world-loving Deity of the cross continues to be denigrated, humanity, trusting in a God who will fix it all, may be maneuvered by its folly and forgetfulness into a collective suicide pact, either the quick nuclear-induced variety or one arising from slow suffocation of nature.

Conclusion

I realize that I have taken up most of this article analyzing the darkness of North American amnesia. If this were a sermon one would expect that I would conclude with a word of hope. A little poem to take it all back and send the reader into the world refreshed if somewhat troubled. But I have no simple hope to offer, only a challenge, a challenge to explore the forgotten shadows of this earth, to remember those lost and hiding in margins, to become one with those who dwell in the dark crevasses of our context and to become intimate with the life of creation which is besmirched through pollution. At this particular time and in this context serious Christian theology and responsible political action must begin with a thorough exploration of darkness before it has any authority to speak about the light.

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