

Religion and the Environment

Russell E. Train

I am neither a theologian nor a philosopher. For a good many years, I was a relatively active layman in the Episcopal Church in Washington, although I have been something of a "backslider" in more recent years. It may be significant that my absence from regular Sunday services dates back almost exactly to the time my wife and I purchased a farm on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Suddenly, my weekends no longer included formal religious observance, but, instead, were filled with the enjoyment of fields and woods and water, the presence of wildlife, the rhythm of the seasons. And for the past 30 years I have been part of the environmental movement, both in government and in the private sector.

During much of this time, I have been puzzled—to say the least—by what has seemed to me the almost total obliviousness of organized religion toward the environment. It has been nothing less than extraordinary. Here we have had one of the most fundamental concerns to agitate human society within living memory—certainly in North America and Europe—and, increasingly, around the globe. Here we have issues that go to

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the heart of the human condition, to the quality of human life, even to humanity's ultimate survival. Here we have problems that can be said to threaten the very integrity of creation. And yet the churches

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and other institutions of organized religion have largely ignored the whole subject.

Of course, a number of thoughtful persons have, over the past 20 years or so, explored the interrelationship of religion and the environment, of human spirituality and nature. However, until recently, organized religion has remained largely silent on the subject and on the sidelines. Yet our churches, synagogues,

temples and mosques should be principal vehicles for instilling environmental values in our planet's people. And, believe me, it is very much a matter of values.

To be fair, I must point out that the organized environmental movement has, on its side, largely ignored the potentially central role that religion can have in bringing about a new harmony between man and nature. Hopefully, an active partnership is now arising between the environmental and religious communities.

It was in 1986 that the World Wide Fund for Nature—formerly called the World Wildlife Fund and still so called in the United States and Canada—brought together at Assisi representatives of the five major religions of the world—Christian, Jewish, Moslem, Hindu and Buddhist—to explore the development of a single, unified statement of religious responsibility toward nature. While a single statement did not prove practical at that time, each religion made its own statement, consonant with its own beliefs and traditions, and these have been published in the *Assisi Declarations*. The Assisi experience was an exciting one and has been highly influential in bringing different religious groups to address their responsibilities toward nature. In 1988, Pope John Paul II and the Dalai Lama met in Rome to discuss issues of "world peace, spiritual

values and protection of the earth's natural environment." A number of other initiatives have and are occurring. At long last, religion seems to be awakening to the environment.

I noted earlier that I am neither a theologian nor a philosopher. Nor am I a scientist. Yet I know that our human life, its quality and its very existence, are totally dependent upon the natural systems of the earth—the air, the water, the soils and the extraordinary diversity of plant and animal life, systems all driven by the energy of the sun. We could not exist without the support of these natural systems, nor could any of the other forms of life with which we share the earth. These are facts over which there can be no argument. We are all part of a living community that is mutually dependent. All life exists in an infinitely complex set of interrelationships—truly a "web of life"—that we disturb at our peril.

We depend upon the air to supply us with the oxygen we must breathe—oxygen that, in turn, is produced by the microorganisms in the surface of the ocean and by the vegetative cover of the land, particularly in its tropical forests, often referred to as the "lungs of the planet." We depend for our sustenance on the productivity of the soil, whose fertility is, in turn, sustained by the nitrogen-fixing ability of soil bacteria. The humus essential to productive soils is, of course, the product of the work of other bacteria, beetles, worms and such. Size is clearly no measure of the importance of one's role in the planetary scheme. In fact, it is truly the little things that run the world! Our grains and other crops, our orchards and much of the world's forests depend for pollination and, thus, their continued existence, upon insects, birds and bats among other mammals—often highly specialized to serve the needs of a particular species of plant.

The most valuable fruit crop of southeast Asian is *durian*, a \$100 million-a-year crop, and it is pollinated entirely by bats. Birds and bats are responsible for

eliminating a high proportion of the world's destructive insects and weed seeds—far more than all the insecticides and herbicides we apply. Only last week, I read a news report that in Pakistan a species of owl, considered there a bird of ill omen, is responsible for controlling the rats and mice that would otherwise destroy a large part of the grain crop. A majority of our North American bird species, which provide us with such valuable (and free) services, migrate to Mexico and farther south in the winter. A

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number of these species are in substantial decline because of the destruction of the tropical forests on which they depend for winter habitat.

These are a few examples—and their number could be almost infinite—to illustrate the dependence of human and other life on the natural systems of the earth as well as the intricate interdependence of the living community as a whole. It is important to be explicit about such examples because our increasingly urban population tends to take human self-sufficiency for granted and lives in al-

most total ignorance of the true "facts of life."

Given the historic tendency of the human race to put its own self-interest ahead of everything else and, usually, to measure that self-interest in the near term rather than the long term, it is probably not surprising that the natural systems of the earth are under such dire threat today. We are all familiar with the litany of environmental threats. A partial one would include the destruction of tropical forests, the loss of productive soils, the spread of deserts, the declining supplies of fresh water, the depletion of ocean fisheries, the pervasive pollution of air, land and water, the accelerating extinction of species, the likelihood of global warming and the depletion of the life-protecting stratospheric ozone layer. It should be pointed out that, in the case of stratospheric ozone depletion, which could have a catastrophic impact on life on earth, the cause is purely and simply human technology—our refrigerants, air conditioners, fire extinguishers, spray propellants, etc. Finally, overarching all the other environmental threats, of course, is the burgeoning human population. And here again, we clearly have no one to blame but ourselves, and here it is not so much our technology as the lack of its use.

As critical and seemingly intractable as environmental problems are today, with 5.3 billion people on the face of the earth, these problems will be compounded exponentially as we move inevitably to 11.3 billion people and, very likely, to 14 billion by the end of the next century. And yet, Pope John Paul is reported to have declared recently in Mexico:

"If the possibility of conceiving a child is artificially eliminated in the conjugal act, couples shut themselves off from God and oppose His will."

Personally, I find it difficult to accept that it is the will of God that humanity

should degrade, deface, desecrate and ultimately, perhaps, destroy His creation on earth. Yet that is the course on which we are embarked. Almost every significant threat to the environment is contributed to and compounded by human numbers. Moreover, whatever other adverse impacts on the natural environment may result from the growth in sheer human numbers, such growth is necessarily accompanied by a reduction in space for other species, in the opportunity for other forms of life. Natural ecosystems do not have the capacity to absorb infinite numbers of species.

LOSS OF SPECIES

To me, the most grievous assault on the earth's environment is the destruction of species—both plant and animal. It is the destruction of life itself, life which has evolved over hundreds of millions of years into a diversity of forms that stagger the imagination, life of a beauty and complexity that fill one with awe and wonder, life in which the creation is surely manifest.

Some scientists today estimate that there are up to 30 million species of life on the earth. Twenty to 30 percent of these are projected to vanish forever over the next very few years due, in large part, to human action and especially to the destruction of tropical forests. The eminent biologist, E.O. Wilson, has said: "The sin our descendants are least likely to forgive us is the loss of biological diversity."

We hear much today about the "right to life" and the phrase, as normally employed, seems to extend only to human life, as if the rest of life is somehow irrelevant. I have tried to develop the point that human life cannot exist in isolation from other forms of life, that our existence is, in fact, dependent upon those other forms of life. We are, indeed, part of a community of life and our apparent dominance as a species should

not be permitted to obscure that fact. Putting it bluntly, anthropocentrism is simply irrational. And yet that is the thrust of much of our traditional religious thought and teaching, particularly in the West.

I do not suggest that the Christian church abandon its concern for humanity, but that it give at least equal time to the rest of God's creation and do so, not just as a concern that is separate and apart, but as one that recognizes that the welfare of any part of creation, including the human part, is inseparable from the welfare of the whole—that it is the community as a whole for which we must necessarily care. We really have no other option in this regard. If we truly care for the human condition, then we must necessarily care for the rest of creation on which humanity's well-being, and even existence, so clearly depend.

It is not enough, in my mind, to say that we should act as good stewards of the earth. Stewardship suggests that we have a management responsibility and that smacks too much to me of the same anthropocentrism that has gotten us into trouble in the first place. After all, the planet got along very well indeed and for a very long time without our managerial assistance. Indeed, you might say that the earth has been a far better steward of the human race than vice versa. If the living community of the earth operated on a democratic basis, I have no doubt the other members would quickly vote us out.

There is also no doubt that humanity is now the dominant species on the earth although there is no assurance that this is a permanent status. After all, *homo sapiens* has only been here about 250,000 years, a blink of the eye in evolutionary terms. Humanity today holds the fate of most other life in its hands, a reality that is awesome and should be humbling. Unfortunately, we are more apt to feel such power a mark of our success. I am afraid we have our values pretty much backwards in this regard.

ROLE OF THE CHURCH

And here it is, it seems to me, that the church should define its special role in environmental matters. Family, school and church were the principal transmitters of values in my early life. The church will seldom have the expertise and, thus, the credibility to involve itself in the increasingly technical and complex debates over environmental issues, whether those involving clean air, toxic wastes, tropical forests, etc., but it does have the credibility and the historic mission of articulating and teaching values to society.

The church should assume a major responsibility for teaching that we humans, individually and collectively, are part of the living community of the earth that nurtures and sustains us; that humanity, as well as all life, depends for its very being upon the healthy functioning of the natural systems of the earth; that all living things, including humans, are interdependent; that we have the duty, collectively and individually, to care for God's creation and that in it lie all the creative possibilities for life now and in the future. These are precepts that could provide the substance for an Eleventh Commandment: Thou shalt cherish and care for the earth and all within it.

Of course, adoption of such a set of values would require a fundamental change in the way we look at the world around us and at our relationship with it. Such values would be decidedly human values, not self-centered, but providing positive guidelines for creative human outreach to the world and all within it. Such values would provide a logical framework within which human society can address the entire range of environmental problems facing the planet. And these values would provide the essential spiritual energy for effective action to address these problems.

And so it seems to me that the major challenge to religion as it addresses the environment is to give leadership to

human understanding and acceptance of these essentially ecological values. It should do so in the curricula of its seminaries, in the liturgy of its services, in its preaching from the pulpit and in its teaching of the young. I suspect that a contributing factor in the failure of religion up to now to address these matters is that the clergy have not felt at home with them. Basic courses in ecology should be required in the seminaries and, as a matter

of fact, throughout our educational system. After all, ecology is nothing more than creation at work.

Over the past 20 years, we have seen concern for environmental values institutionalized throughout much of our society—in government at all levels, in business, in the professions, in international agencies, in citizen environmental action, among other areas. It is now high time for the oldest human institutions of

all, our religions, to make concern for nature—caring for creation—a central part of their doctrine and practice. I firmly believe that doing so could help revitalize society's commitment to religion, particularly among the young, and would help establish these fundamental values on which the future of the earth and of ourselves so clearly depends.◀

Seeing the Forest for the Trees: "New Perspectives" in the Forest Service

W. Bruce Shepard

New Perspectives is the USDA Forest Service's approach for managing forests and rangelands to sustain their full array of values and uses. The aim of New Perspectives is to highlight new approaches to sustainable, multiple-use management through renewed commitment to our land ethic, greater responsiveness to people's needs and concerns and acceleration of our continual search for management practices that sustain diverse and productive ecosystems while providing resources that people need.

Safely contained within laboratories and research stations for 20 years, "new forestry" has broken out and is now demonstrating its vigor as it spreads through a vulnerable polity. "New forestry" is "in forestry." Those who have

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built and nurtured "new forestry" must be viewing the current popularity of the subject with some trepidation. There may be feelings of vindication and hopes for improved management. There must also be grave concern about what the sausage-making machine we call "government" will spit out as "new forestry."

One sausage—still very much in the making—is the "new perspectives" program which the USDA Forest Service

has recently announced. The terms "new forestry" and "new perspectives" are being used interchangeably by practitioners. However, the terms are not the same and the differences need to be understood in order to fully appreciate the difficult tasks that lie ahead in the management of our public forest lands. To understand the differences, we need to turn to an analysis of why "old forestry" is not longer politically viable.

Controversy in the management of our forests is nothing new. The origins of the National Forest System can be traced to two major, radical social movements that coincided at the turn of the century: one was the reaction to the dominance of government by business interests that came to be known as the progressive movement; the other was the conservation movement, a response to the wide-scale, unregulated exploitation and de-