

A GREEN THEOLOGY? THEOLOGY AND ECOLOGY

By DENIS CARROLL



GREEN THEOLOGY? SURELY NOT. Merely green theology would adopt a new fashion, jump on a new bandwagon. At best it would endorse—somewhat belatedly—abstract policies of resource management. At worst, it would blunder into grossly selfish ecological programmes which effectively serve the interest of the rich and the powerful. There are many shades of green! Some ecological policies are unacceptable in that they overlook disadvantaged people and occlude the real causes of the present crisis. Established interests tend to co-opt ecological issues for their own purposes. In that event, care for the earth becomes ‘a classic case of doublespeak, a lot of sophistry and not a little deliberate duplicity and cunning’.¹ If theology is to enter this complex area it should be rigorous in its analysis of facts and underlying causes. It should be clear about its own value preferences. It should be informed of a wide array of shifting data. Only thus can theology avoid substituting easy rhetoric for hard-edged reflection and appropriate action.

Theology and ecology

Theology and ecology in critical dialogue? Yes. Emphatically. A true ecology is concerned with equity and justice. It has a care for global justice as well as responsibility to generations yet unborn. Urgent reminders now come thick and fast. The signs are ever more clear that nature’s patience is not inexhaustible. A new challenge is posed to ethics, politics and economics as well as to theology. Stewardship of a beleaguered planet becomes a pressing issue for reflection and action. Christian theology should not absent itself from this scene. Barbara Ward’s questions are well-placed:

When we confront the ethical and the natural context of our daily living, are we not brought back to what is absolutely basic in our Christian faith? On the one hand, we are faced with the stewardship of this beautiful, subtle, incredibly delicate and fragile planet. On the

other hand, we confront the destiny of our fellow man. How can we say that we are followers of Christ if this dual responsibility does not seem to us the essence and heart of our religion?²

The scenario of ecological Armageddon is unhelpful. It leads either to paralysis or to a prodigal 'last splash' psychology. Nevertheless, there is an imperative to heed urgent warnings. We need another, more just way of stewarding a precious but gravely threatened inheritance. Estimates show that if present models of development and consumption remain unchanged, 'the depletion of the biosphere to the point of instability will occur in the second half of the next century'.³ William Ophuls in his masterly study, *The politics of scarcity*, writes:

the epoch we have already entered is a turning point . . . comparable to the Neolithic Revolution; it will inevitably involve wracking political turmoil and the extraordinary re-constitution of the reigning political paradigm throughout most of the modern world.⁴

Has theology a contribution to offer? I would argue to the affirmative.

The issues arising from the dialogue between Christian theology and ecology cannot be treated comprehensively in a brief article. One can do little more than allude to them and, even then, with some tentativeness. If the ecological issue is taken seriously it will question our individual patterns of consumption. Even more radical will be the questions to our political structures and economic models. At the ultimate, we face the question of what it is to be responsibly human in a creation we share with many other inhabitants. Our planet is disclosed as at once more splendid, more interdependent and yet more fragile than we ever could have divined before the Pandora's box of technological mastery was opened.

Reverence for all life

Insofar as ecological thinking proposes a global ethic of reverence for life it challenges renewal of the Judaeo-Christian apperception of God's original gift of creation. The foundational values of an ecological ethic include reverence for life, responsibility in patterns of resource use and frugality in modes of consumption. Theological reflection on creation will disclose similar—if somewhat forgotten—values. Appreciation of creation's goodness, acceptance of our responsibility as image of God, compassion for all our fellow

creatures, are at the heart of the biblical text. Life is given through the creativity of God. As such it is to be cherished and safeguarded. Stewardship of God's creation is about affirming, cherishing and enabling to flourish all life-oriented values.

Human life bears an especial dignity, a particular sacredness. The medieval adage puts it well: man/woman is sacred (*res sacra homo*). To say this is not to de-emphasize reverence for all life. There is a web of life, an inter-relatedness which is disregarded to the detriment of both human and infra-human life. Insofar as respect for life diminishes, human flourishing comes under threat to a proportionate degree. Attack upon nature forebodes attack upon human dignity also. The web of life means that 'nature and humanity will be liberated together or not at all'. A Latin-American ecologist, Eduardo Gudynas, argues rightly that 'every step in environmental destruction has the effect of increasing social injustice, and every act of social injustice has the effect of increasing environmental destruction'.⁵

Appreciation of original blessing

Matthew Fox's much noticed works emphasize the need for reaffirmation of the perduring goodness of God's creation.⁶ This positive note is firmly set in the very first pages of our scripture. Repeatedly the Priestly account of creation (P) emphasizes that creation is good, very good. For the P tradition, creation's six days lead to a seventh when, in a sabbath of rest, the beauty and goodness of the divine work are celebrated. In the second account—the Yahwist—humankind is placed in a garden fair and fertile, which man and woman are to maintain and cherish. For the Yahwist, as generally for the societies of the ancient near East, the garden image bespoke security, careful husbandry and all the beneficent effects that human intervention can bring to enviroing nature. Cumulatively, then, both the Priestly and the Yahwist accounts inculcate responsible stewardship. They propose respect and amity between all the elements of creation.

The traditions from which Genesis is fashioned were cognizant of the threats to original blessing. There is the wrenching fact of evil. Drought and desert, animals and people can pose a threat to the utopia of Eden. Yet the ideal remains clear even against the backdrop of the fall. The ideal is of the goodness of creation, respect for all its inhabitants, and merciful stewardship in fashioning what today we might call an earth community. Notice that, for the Priestly account (P), taking life (whether for food or in punishment for killing) roots in

the historical distortion of God's intention and, in particular, in the fratricide committed by Cain against Abel (Genesis 9,6).

Biblical tradition refuses to depreciate the materiality of creation. 'The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof' (Ps 23) remains the *leitmotif* of biblical creation theology. There is a consistent refusal to 'flee the world' into an ethereal or exclusively spiritual region. God is encountered through people, through historical events, through nature. The appreciation of material reality as the avenue of God's approach pervades the Old Testament. At the heart of the New Testament is the mystery of Word-made-flesh, the Incarnation. The advent of Emmanuel (God with us) bears enormous significance for appreciation of our world. Matter is not divine. Yet it is open to the purposes of God in the unforeseen way instanced by its reception of Jesus of Nazareth, the Word of God. The human body, indeed the whole of creation, thereby becomes the place of God's creative-redemptive purpose. Through the resurrection of Jesus, not simply human beings but all material creation are suffused with an Easter glory. Their destiny, their worth and their hope are re-affirmed. Paul's much quoted text today discloses an ecological as well as an eschatological meaning: 'The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God' (Rom 8, 21). In the same mode is St Thomas Aquinas's insistence that to insult or degrade the creature is tantamount to insult of the creator.

Man/woman as image of God

The tenet of humanity's especial imaging of God is an area of possible conflict between ecological thought and Judaeo-Christian theology. Since the publication of Lynn White's article in 1967 'On the historical roots of our ecologic crisis' the charge is made that Christianity is excessively human-centred. Anthropocentrism, it is claimed, constitutes a major obstacle to cherishing our planet as an *oikos*, a common home, for the teeming variety of interdependent species. 'Increase, multiply, and subdue the earth' has been too rigorously interpreted. The earth has been 'subdued' in a manner detrimental to all. Human interests are the only ones consulted. Humankind has been taken to be the only worthwhile inhabitant, the only subject of rights. Here one can neither detail the arguments of White, Watts, McHarg and others, nor frame a complete reply to their arguments.⁷ The following points can, however, be summarily addressed:

(a) The unique dignity of each person is an irreplaceable datum of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. As image of God each person is endowed with an especial dignity, regardless of sex, condition or stage of life. For Christian theology, the fact that we are brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ reinforces the respect due to every human being without exception. In this careful sense the Christian tradition is anthropocentric. In the context of widespread impoverishment, underdevelopment and arrogant disregard of the rights of marginalized people, one will argue for the reiteration, rather than the obfuscation, of each person's right to life, dignity and flourishing.

(b) Thus, there is an unavoidable tension between Christian anthropology and any ecological proposal which would downplay the dignity of even one human being. Some forms of 'deep' ecology appear to equate people with penguins or whales. This is unacceptable. It runs counter to the best elements of the Christian tradition and it detracts from the urgency to create a just social order. On the other hand, the insistence on the *intrinsic* value—not merely an *instrumental* value—of non-human forms of life is timely and necessary. In this sense one has to speak of a 'chastened anthropocentrism' (Bernard Häring). We need to construct an ethic of concomitance which gives due recognition both to the dignity of every human being and to the respect for the interlocking elements of the web of life. Given the qualifications mentioned above, we can—and perhaps must—move towards life-centred (biocentric) thinking and values. Given the prevalence of death-dealing elements within our technological culture we urgently need to initiate a 'culture of life'.⁸

(c) The notion of merciful stewardship is at the centre of our responsibility as image of God. As vicereagents of God within creation (not above it) we have both a vocation and a task to love, care for and develop the portion of creation we can affect. For the first time in the history of the planet, human beings possess the tragic power to blight our whole earth. We begin to see that there are things technically feasible but utterly destructive of all life within a matter of generations. What we can do, we ought sometimes *not* do. In terms of respect for all life, in terms of environmental responsibility, in terms of observance of human rights, there are moral limits to the exercise of technological power. In drawing these limits we are obliged to remember that non-human inhabitants of the earth, also, have a claim to be considered. It is not simply a matter of self-interest, no matter how enlightened. It is a matter of stark ecological justice. Thus the qualification—*chastened* anthropocentrism.

The greening of the churches

To speak of 'the greening of the churches' is double-edged. The phrase aptly reminds us that the churches have come relatively late to the ecological scene. On the other hand, 'greening of the churches' bears overtones of fashion or fad. Thereby, the contribution which the Christian tradition can make is in danger of being obscured. For some decades now, the World Council of Churches has linked social justice, ecological sustainability and participatory politics. Through the 1970s the WCC's programme of consultation focused on the creation of a just, sustainable and participative society. Its other consultation—reaching a climax in the General Assembly at Canberra (1991)—speaks of justice, peace and integrity of creation. In January 1990, Pope John Paul II published his 'peace with God, peace with all of creation'.⁹ Common to all three initiatives is a valuable interconnection of justice, sustainability and a more participative style of politics. Let us examine these elements a little more closely.

Justice

The fact is incontrovertible; injustice stalks our world. Some abound in luxury. Others live in sub-human conditions. The disparity is neither accident nor act of God. It is the result of the structures and mechanisms which shape our global society. Economic models, modes of production, political rivalries, have led to the social and ecological crisis we now face. As we approach the 500th anniversary of the discovery of the 'new world' we are reminded that the power play of commercial, technological, political and religious interests in the colonial West were imposed on colonized lands to the detriment of countless people and of nature generally. In their joint work *One world*, Barbara Ward and René Dubois lucidly analyse the injustice and instability inbuilt in the technocratic-economist models predominant since the sixteenth century.¹⁰

Such a critique will confront us with several different agenda. First, there is the tolerant collaboration which has hitherto prevailed between the power-structures of the dominant countries and the churches. There are welcome signs that this collaboration may be breaking down as the churches move towards a more critical prophetic stance. Second, there is the position—unacceptable if one holds to the indispensability of social justice on a global scale—that ecology must prevail over justice. Such appears to be the position of some Neo-Malthusian theorists who argue, as did Garret Hardin,

that 'injustice is preferable to total ruin'.¹¹ Against this, one will insist that injustice spells ruin: Hardin's dilemma is unacceptable. Third, we are led to see that the western (or, perhaps, the northern hemispheric) paradigm of social organization and economic production has shown itself unable to deliver either justice or longer-term sustainability. In regard to justice and sustainability 'we cannot survive as rich world' (Barbara Ward). The injustice to the poor, the demands upon the environment by the 'developed' countries, lead to disaster. Social justice is a *sine qua non* of ecological responsibility. Pope John Paul II reminds us that an answer to the ecological problem cannot be found without a solution to the problem of poverty. Today, we are led to speak of both social justice and eco-justice: 'If the cosmic web embraces us all, if it is woven of the strands of which we are part, then justice to the cosmic web means justice to all its elements—to all brothers and sisters of creation'.¹²

Sustainability

Ours is a small planet. Its resources are limited. Kenneth Boulding's image of 'spaceship earth' has more than a little validity. Yet demands upon its resources and life systems have increased exponentially. Reputable studies argue that the earth's population will have trebled by the mid-twenty-first century. Energy demands will have doubled well before that. Can this continue? Will the carrying capacity of the earth be exceeded within two or three generations? Adding to these considerations the recurrent crises in waste-disposal, in pollution control, in food production and distribution, one cannot evade the necessity for limits to this kind of growth.

Sustainability is about ensuring that the demands made on the environment do not exhaust our patrimony. A significant cut-back has to occur *before* that crucial point beyond which social and ecological disaster becomes inevitable. If future disaster is to be avoided, action is now requisite. Sustainability, therefore, is about providence, frugality and retrenchment *now*. It presupposes a change—even a conversion—in regard to patterns of consumption and production. W. Ophuls puts it well: 'The essential message of ecology is limitation: there is only so much the biosphere can take and only so much it can give, and this is less than we desire'.¹³

Nevertheless, sustainability in regard to economic activity carries several meanings. A steady-state economy—certainly as described by some theorists—would consolidate existing levels of injustice. If sustainability is to be achieved at the expense of the poor then it is

doubly unjust. Rich countries and classes should bear the burden of any retrenchment. The developed nations—the colonial West—attained their ‘development’ at the expense of the countries they exploited and oppressed. It would compound the injustice were the poor countries now expected to pay for the protection of their despoilers. Sustainability, therefore, is misconceived if it offends against equity.

Participative politics and policies

Participation in the decisions which effect one is a widely inoperative right. Even at its best, democracy provides little participation in crucial decisions. In politics and economics (as well as in religion) decisions are taken, and policies set in train, without participation by those most affected. Perhaps real participation is feasible only in the context of ‘small [being] beautiful’ (E. F. Schumacher). Nevertheless, even in the small scale, we find it difficult to achieve truly participative modes of action and relationship.

Ecological responsibility demands both enlightened politics and effective participation by as many people as possible. It becomes ever clearer that concerted supra-national policies for environmental protection is a *sine qua non* of future survival. On the other hand, it is unlikely that just and sustainable policies will issue from supra-national bodies alone. Participation in crucial decisions by those affected becomes even more necessary as stringent policies are formulated. Even the most enlightened politicians, and expert groups which advise them, should be accountable to those affected by their decisions and policies.

Edward Gudynas speaks of the necessity for both environmental management and an anti-hegemonic critique of management.¹⁴ Environmental management, for all its overtones of elitism or ‘new priesthood’, is indispensable if policies are to be concerted and effective. Good intentions alone are not sufficient. Yet anti-hegemonic critique is necessary to resist the tyranny of the expert or the bureaucrat. A prophetic theology reminds us that the logic of domination or hegemony comes easily to us all. This logic, prevalent through human history, wreaks both social and ecological havoc. The hegemony of powerful over powerless, of rich over poor, of men over women (in the main) is by no means new. The language of the scientific revolution heralded by Francis Bacon reflects the same logic. Bacon could announce: ‘I come in very truth leading to you nature with all her children to bind her to your service and make her your slave’.¹⁵

We stand in need of a new and better logic. Without minimizing real conflicts, without relapsing into facile romanticism, we need the logic of solidarity. Instead of the mind-set of 'being over' we need the mind-set of 'being with'. Instead of power we should think of facilitation. Instead of wasteful aggrandizement we need frugal grace. To achieve this requires conversion as much in ourselves as in others. Certain forgotten traditions in Christianity, in Judaism, and in Buddhism contain helpful guidelines to the conversion. So, too, do some liberation movements, notably the movement which derives from feminist thought.

Social justice, sustainable modes of production and consumption, politics which allow for wise management, stern critique of all forms of domination, are the elements which together point us towards a new model of responsible stewardship. At one level, it is now a matter of enlightened self-interest. The powers conferred by technological mastery have come to pose a threat as well as convey a promise. What once worked 'to the relief of man's estate' now threatens to destroy us all. We need a new wisdom in the exercise of political, economic and technological power: 'We have now become far too smart scientifically to survive much longer without wisdom'.¹⁶ At another level, for Christians, it is a matter of responsibility to God and to God's creation. There is no ready-made blueprint for the exercise of such responsibility. In the wake of the Gulf war one notices the strange imbalance between the massive resources deployed to 'search and destroy' and the feeble tentativeness in 'succour and sustenance' for the refugee Kurds. This is one sad example of how far we have come and how little real progress we have made. It is all the more necessary, therefore, to persevere in the search for justice, solidarity, and care for the earth's inhabitants. Here is the task of discipleship for all believers in the God of life, of justice, of creativity.

NOTES

¹ Rajni Kothnari: 'Environment, technology and ethics', in *Ethics of environment and development*, eds J. R. Engel and J. Gibb (Bellhaven Press, London, 1990), pp 27-35, citation at p 27. This collection of essays is a major contribution to the literature of ecology, ethics and development. Hereafter referred to as Engel.

² Barbara Ward: 'Justice in a human environment', *IDOC international* (North American edition 53, May 1973), p 36, cited by Robert J. Moore in 'A new Christian reformation', Engel, p 104.

³ J. Lapter: 'Raising the biosphere to the noosphere', in Engel, pp 117-126, citation at p 117.

⁴ William Ophuls: *Ecology and the politics of scarcity* (Freeman and Co., San Francisco, 1977), p 137.

- ⁵ Eduardo Gudynas: 'The search for an ethic of sustainable development in Latin America', in Engel, pp 139-49, citation at p 146.
- ⁶ Matthew Fox: *Original blessing* (Bear, Santa Fe, 1983), and *The coming of the cosmic Christ* (Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1988).
- ⁷ Lynn White: 'The historical roots of our ecologic crisis', *Science* 155 (1967), pp 1203-7; Alan Watts: *Nature, man and woman* (Pantheon Books, New York, 1958); Ian McHarg: 'The place of nature in the city of man', in *Western man and environmental ethics*, ed Ian G. Barbour (Addison Wesley, Reading, Mass., 1973).
- ⁸ Bernard Häring: *Free and faithful in Christ* vol 3 (Crossroad, New York, 1981), p 181.
- ⁹ *Peace with God, peace with all of creation* (New Year's Day Message 1990), available from Irish Commission for Justice and Peace, Booterstown Avenue, Blackrock, Co. Dublin, Ireland.
- ¹⁰ Barbara Ward and René Dubois: *Only one world* (Pelican, London, 1972), pp 48-66.
- ¹¹ Garrett Hardin: *Population, evolution and birth control* (W. H. Freeman, San Francisco, 1969), and *Exploring new ethics for survival* (Viking, New York, 1972).
- ¹² Henryk Skolimowski: 'Reverence for life', in Engel, pp 97-113.
- ¹³ William Ophuls: *Ecology and the politics of scarcity*, p 43.
- ¹⁴ E. Gudynas, in Engel, pp 145f.
- ¹⁵ Cited by Robert J. Moore in Engel, p 104.
- ¹⁶ Mike Cooley: 'It is time to declare war on famine and suffering', in *The Irish Times*, 20 April 1991.