

GOD AND COUNTRY

The subject of Christianity and ecology is endlessly, perhaps infinitely, fascinating. It is fascinating theologically and artistically because of our never-to-be-satisfied curiosity about the relation between a made thing and its maker. It is fascinating practically because we are unrelentingly required to honor in all things the relation between the world and its Maker, and because that requirement implies another, equally unrelenting, that we ourselves, as makers, should always honor that greater making; we are required, that is, to study the ways of working well, and those ways are endlessly fascinating. The subject of Christianity and ecology also is politically fascinating, to those of us who are devoted both to biblical tradition and to the defense of the earth, because we are always hankering for the support of the churches, which seems to us to belong, properly and logically, to our cause.

This latter fascination, though not the most difficult and fearful, is certainly the most frustrating, for the fact simply is that the churches, which claim to honor God as the "maker of heaven and earth," have lately shown little inclination to honor the earth or to protect it from those who would dishonor it.

Organized Christianity seems, in general, to have made peace with "the economy" by divorcing itself from economic issues, and this, I think, has proved to be a disaster, both religious and economic. The reason for this, on the side of religion, is suggested by the adjective "organized." It is clearly possible that, in the condition of the world as the world now is, organization can force upon an institution a character that is alien or even antithetical to it. The *organized* church comes immediately under a compulsion to think of itself, and identify itself to the world, not as an institution synonymous with its truth and its membership, but as a

hodgepodge of funds, properties, projects, and offices, all urgently requiring economic support. The organized church makes peace with a destructive economy and divorces itself from economic issues because it is economically compelled to do so. Like any other public institution so organized, the organized church is dependent on "the economy"; it cannot survive apart from those economic practices that its truth forbids and that its vocation is to correct. If it comes to a choice between the extermination of the fowls of the air and the lilies of the field and the extermination of a building fund, the organized church will elect—indeed, has already elected—to save the building fund. The irony is compounded and made harder to bear by the fact that the building fund can be preserved by crude applications of money, but the fowls of the air and the lilies of the field can be preserved only by true religion, by the *practice* of a proper love and respect for them as the creatures of God. No wonder so many sermons are devoted exclusively to "spiritual" subjects. If one is living by the tithes of history's most destructive economy, then the disembodiment of the soul becomes the chief of worldly conveniences.

There are many manifestations of this tacit alliance between the organized churches and "the economy," but I need to speak only of two in order to make my point. The first is the phrase "full-time Christian service," which the churches of my experience have used exclusively to refer to the ministry, thereby at once making of the devoted life a religious specialty or career and removing the possibility of devotion from other callings. Thus the \$50,000-a-year preacher is a "full-time Christian servant," whereas a \$20,000- or a \$10,000-a-year farmer, or a farmer going broke, so far as the religious specialists are concerned, must serve "the economy" in his work or in his failure and serve God in his spare time. The professional class is likewise free to serve itself in its work and to serve God by giving the church its ten percent. The churches in this way excerpt sanctity from the human economy and its work just as Cartesian science has ex-

cerpted it from the material creation. And it is easy to see the interdependence of these two desecrations: the desecration of nature would have been impossible without the desecration of work, and vice versa.

The second manifestation I want to speak of is the practice, again common in the churches of my experience, of using the rural ministry as a training ground for young ministers and as a means of subsidizing their education. No church official, apparently, sees any logical, much less any spiritual, problem in sending young people to minister to country churches before they have, according to their institutional superiors, become eligible to be ministers. These student ministers invariably leave the rural congregations that have sponsored or endured their educations as soon as possible once they have their diplomas in hand. The denominational hierarchies, then, evidently regard country places in exactly the same way as "the economy" does: as sources of economic power to be exploited for the advantage of "better" places. The country people will be used to educate ministers for the benefit of city people (in wealthier churches) who, obviously, are thought more deserving of educated ministers. This, I am well aware, is mainly the fault of the church organizations; it is not a charge that can be made to stick to any young minister in particular: not all ministers should be country ministers, just as not all people should be country people. And yet it is a fact that in the more than fifty years that I have known my own rural community, many student ministers have been "called" to serve in its churches, but not one has ever been "called" to stay. The message that country people get from their churches, then, is the same message that they get from "the economy": that, as country people, they do not matter much and do not deserve much consideration. And this inescapably imposes an economic valuation on spiritual things. According to the modern church, as one of my Christian friends said to me, "The soul of the plowboy ain't worth as much as the soul of the delivery boy."

If the churches are mostly indifferent to the work and the

people by which the link between economy and ecosystem must be enacted, it is no wonder that they are mostly indifferent to the fate of the ecosystems themselves. One must ask, then: is this state of affairs caused by Christian truth or by the failures and errors of Christian practice? My answer is that it is caused by the failures and errors of Christian practice. The evident ability of most church leaders to be “born again in Christ” without in the least discomfiting their faith in the industrial economy’s bill of goods, however convenient and understandable it may be, is not scriptural.

Anyone making such a statement must deal immediately with the belief of many non-Christian environmentalists as well as at least some Christians that Genesis 1:28, in which God instructs Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth, and subdue it,” gives unconditional permission to humankind to use the world as it pleases. Such a reading of Genesis 1:28 is contradicted by virtually all the rest of the Bible, as many people by now have pointed out. The ecological teaching of the Bible is simply inescapable: God made the world because He wanted it made. He thinks the world is good, and He loves it. It is His world; He has never relinquished title to it. And He has never revoked the conditions, bearing on His gift to us of the use of it, that oblige us to take excellent care of it. If God loves the world, then how might any person of faith be excused for not loving it or justified in destroying it?

But of course, those who see in Genesis 1:28 the source of all our abuse of the natural world (most of them apparently having read no more of the Bible than that verse) are guilty of an extremely unintelligent misreading of Genesis 1:28 itself. How, for example, would one arrange to “replenish the earth” if “subdue” means, as alleged, “conquer” or “defeat” or “destroy”?

We have in fact in the biblical tradition, rooted in the Bible but amplified in agrarian, literary, and other cultural traditions stemming from the Bible, the idea of stewardship as conditioned

by the idea of usufruct. George Perkins Marsh was invoking biblical tradition when he wrote, in 1864, that “man has too long forgotten that the earth was given to him for usufruct alone, not for consumption, still less for profligate waste.” The Mormon essayist Hugh Nibley invoked it explicitly when he wrote that “man’s dominion is a call to service, not a license to exterminate.”

That service, stewardship, is the responsible care of property belonging to another. And by this the Bible does not mean an absentee landlord, but one living on the property, profoundly and intimately involved in its being and its health, as Elihu says to Job: “if he gather unto himself his spirit and his breath; All flesh shall perish together.” All creatures live by God’s spirit, portioned out to them, and breathe His breath. To “lay up . . . treasures in heaven,” then, cannot mean to be spiritual at the earth’s expense, or to despise or condemn the earth for the sake of heaven. It means exactly the opposite: do not desecrate or depreciate these gifts, which take part with us in the being of God, by turning them into worldly “treasure”; do not reduce life to money or to any other mere quantity.

The idea of usufruct gives this point to the idea of stewardship, and makes it practical and economic. Usufruct, the *Oxford English Dictionary* says, is “the right of temporary possession, use, or enjoyment of the advantages of property belonging to another, so far as may be had without causing damage or prejudice to this.” It is hardly a “free-market economy” that the Bible prescribes. Large accumulations of land were, and are, forbidden because the dispossession and privation of some cannot be an acceptable or normal result of the economic activity of others, for that destroys a people as a people; it destroys the community. Usury was, and is, forbidden because the dispossession and privation of some should not be regarded by others as an economic opportunity, for that is contrary to neighborliness; it destroys the community. And the greed that destroys the community also

destroys the land. What the Bible proposes is a moral economy, the standard of which is the health of properties belonging to God.

But we have considered so far only those things of the Creation that can be included within the human economy—the usable properties, so to speak. What about the things that are outside the human economy? What about the things that from the point of view of human need are useless or only partly usable? What about the places that, as is increasingly evident, we should not use at all? Obviously we must go further, and the Bible can take us further. Many passages take us beyond a merely economic stewardship, but the one that has come to seem most valuable to me is Revelation 4:11, because I think it proposes an indispensable standard for the stewardship both of things in use and of useless things and things set aside from use: “Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.”

The implications of this verse are relentlessly practical. The ideas that we are permitted to use things that are pleasing to God, that we have nothing at all to use that is not pleasing to Him, and that necessarily implicated in the power to use is the power to misuse and destroy are troubling, and indeed frightening, ideas. But they are consoling, too, precisely insofar as we have the ability to use well and the goodness or the character required to limit use or to forbear to use.

Our responsibility, then, as stewards, the responsibility that inescapably goes with our dominion over the other creatures, according to Revelation 4:11, is to safeguard God’s pleasure in His work. And we can do that, I think (I don’t know how else we could do it), by safeguarding *our* pleasure in His work, and our pleasure in our own work. Or, if we no longer can trust ourselves to be more than economic machines, then we must do it by safeguarding the pleasure of children in God’s work and in ours. It is

impossible, admittedly, to give an accurate economic value to the goodness of good work, much less to the goodness of an unspoiled forest or prairie or desert, or to the goodness of pure sunlight or water or air. And yet we are required to make an economy that honors such goods and is conversant with them. An economy that ignores them, as our present one does, “builds a Hell in Heaven’s despite.”

As a measure of how far we have “progressed” in our industrial economy, let me quote a part of a sentence from the prayer “For Every Man in His Work” from the 1928 *Book of Common Prayer*: “Deliver us, we beseech thee, in our several callings, from the service of mammon, that we may do the work which thou givest us to do, in truth, in beauty, and in righteousness, with singleness of heart as thy servants, and to the benefit of our fellow men.” What is astonishing about that prayer is that it is a relic. Throughout the history of the industrial revolution, it has become steadily less prayable. The industrial nations are now divided, almost entirely, into a professional or executive class that has not the least intention of working in truth, beauty, and righteousness, as God’s servants, or to the benefit of their fellow men, and an underclass that has no choice in the matter. Truth, beauty, and righteousness now have, and can have, nothing to do with the economic life of most people. This alone, I think, is sufficient to account for the orientation of most churches to religious feeling, increasingly feckless, as opposed to religious thought or religious behavior.

I acknowledge that I feel deeply estranged from most of the manifestations of organized religion, partly for reasons that I have mentioned. Yet I am far from thinking that one can somehow become righteous by carrying protestantism to the logical conclusion of a one-person church. We all belong, at least, to the problem. “There is . . . a price to be paid,” Philip Sherrard says, “for fabricating around us a society which is as artificial and as mechanized as our own, and this is that we can exist in it only on

condition that we adapt ourselves to it. This is our punishment.”*

We all, obviously, are to some extent guilty of this damnable adaptation. We all are undergoing this punishment. But as Philip Sherrard well knows, it is a punishment that we can set our hearts against, an adaptation that we can try with all our might to undo. We can ally ourselves with those things that are worthy: light, air, water, earth; plants and animals; human families and communities; the traditions of decent life, good work, and responsible thought; the religious traditions; the essential stories and songs.

It is presumptuous, personally and historically, to assume that one is a part of a “saving remnant.” One had better doubt that one deserves such a distinction, and had better understand that there may, after all, be nothing left to save. Even so, if one wishes to save anything not protected by the present economy—topsoil, groves of old trees, the possibility of the goodness or health of anything, even the economic relevance of the biblical tradition—one is a part of a remnant, and a dwindling remnant too, though not without hope, and not without the necessary instructions, the most pertinent of which, perhaps, is this, also from Revelation: “Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die.”

1988

A PRACTICAL HARMONY

In 1913, seventy-five years ago, Liberty Hyde Bailey retired from his post at Cornell after a quarter-century during which he had been, first, Professor of Horticulture, and then Director and Dean of the New York State College of Agriculture and Director of the Experiment Station. Two years later he published a little book with the remarkable title *The Holy Earth*. In it he wrote: “Most of our difficulty with the earth lies in the effort to do what perhaps ought not to be done. . . . A good part of agriculture is to learn how to adapt one’s work to nature. . . . To live in right relation with his natural conditions is one of the first lessons that a wise farmer or any other wise man learns.”*

Was that perhaps the exhalation of a restless soul, having cast off at last its academic bonds? No, it was not. For in 1905, the second year of his deanship, he had published a book entitled *The Outlook to Nature*, in which he spoke of nature as “the norm.” “If nature is the norm,” he wrote, “then the necessity for correcting and amending the abuses of civilization becomes baldly apparent by very contrast.” And he added, “The return to nature affords the very means of acquiring the incentive and energy for ambitious and constructive work of a high order.”†

Dean Bailey was not, of course, against the necessary pursuits of the human economy. He was merely for bringing those pursuits into harmony with nature, which he understood as their source and pattern. I mention him here not just because he is one of the inevitable measures of the subsequent history of the Land Grant system, but because, as an officer of that system, he spoke

**The Rape of Man and Nature*, Golgonooza Press (England), pp. 71–72.

**The Holy Earth*, reprinted by The Christian Rural Fellowship, 1946, p. 9.

†*The Outlook to Nature*, Macmillan, 1905, p. 8.