GUEST VIEWPOINT

Earth Day should be a religious holiday

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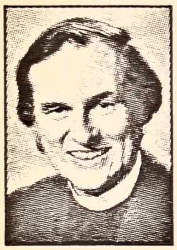
BY THE REV. H. PAUL SANTMIRE

The first Earth Day in 1970 was launched with a salvo against the Bible.



Santmire

Not much has changed in the popular mind since then. So it is necessary to set the record straight: If you read the Bible right, you will want to celebrate Earth Day on Wednesday as a religious holiday.

One of the formative documents of the late 20th century environmental movement was the 1966 essay, "The religious roots of the environmental crisis," by the eminent American historian, Lynn White Jr. White's essay is still ubiquitously quoted and is assigned in virtually all college courses on environmental ethics.

In that article, White argues that the faith of the Bible, especially as that faith was expressed in historic Christianity in the West, was responsible for the modern environmental crisis. This was because the Bible teaches, White maintained, that humans are placed on the Earth to dominate it, even to exploit it.

Historic Christianity, White concluded, therefore has next to nothing to offer to those who are concerned to care for and to save the environment.

Many Christians in the modern era surely did hold such views, and some leading Christian theologians in our own century undoubtedly helped to promote them. This left other believers who wanted to look to the Bible for spiritual and moral guidance about the environmental crisis with nowhere to turn.

No wonder that more than a few environmentally concerned believers in the past few decades have been driven to explore nature-affirming Native American religions or even to dabble in various unorthodox, but apparently earth-friendly "New Age" spiritualities.

The theological position that White criticized, however, was already under attack within various religious communities that trace their lineage to the Bible before White wrote his influential essay. By the 20th anniversary of Earth Day in 1990, indeed, environmental ethics and a theology of ecology had become well-established in mainline religious communities in the West.

A visible fruit of the influence of environmental thinking in those communities was the 1992 launching of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, a coalition involving faith groups such as the National Council of Churches, the U.S. Catholic Conference, the Evangelical Environmental Network, and the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life.

Last year, that partnership initiated a $4 million campaign to save the environment, targeting especially the impact of environmental degradation on the poor.

The biblical mandate for this campaign was forcefully stated by Roman Catholic Bishop William Skylstad of Spokane, Wash., chair of the U.S. Catholic Conference's domestic policy committee: "We are stewards responsible for taking care of God's 'garden' and God's special people, the poor and the vulnerable, the victims of injustice."

Call this the biblical ethic of "ecojustice." But it is doubtful whether this evidently biblical ethic will itself transform the minds and hearts of those religious communities that trace their lineage to the Bible, unless it is rooted in the prayers and the worship of the people themselves.

Believers will not readily do in public what they have not first learned to do as a spiritual habit, shaped by regular liturgical practice.

For this reason many religious groups have already wisely set aside a day in January nearest to the holiday for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., to celebrate his life and his promise. An ethic that opposes racism will not by itself fundamentally change the minds and hearts of believers. That ethic, if it is to be real, must be nurtured by the preaching, the teaching, the praying and the singing.

Likewise, Earth Day must now become a major religious holiday, lest the ethic of ecojustice be like a green tree without good roots.

The biblical resources for such a holiday are rich indeed, contrary to what Lynn White believed. The Bible not only envisions the Earth, and indeed the whole cosmos as "very good." The Bible also celebrated the diversity of creatures as a divine mandate and a divine blessing. Why else are we told that Noah took every creature, the clean as well as the unclean, with him aboard the ark?

Further, the Bible envisions the human relationship to nature, from the very beginning, as a relationship not of domination, but of caring. Adam and Eve are placed in the garden, according to the Book of Genesis, to "care for it and to protect it" (the familiar translation, "to till and keep it," is erroneous).

Indeed, we humans, central as we are in God's eyes, according to the Scriptures, do not own the environment. It is a divine gift, which we receive in trust, in order to share it equitably and wisely with one another, especially with the poor, and in order to care for other creatures for their own sakes and to rejoice in their gloriously beautiful diversity.

Now it is up to our religious communities themselves to accent the positive: to celebrate Earth Day, as a biblically inspired holiday, with the enthusiasm of the psalmist, as he surveys the grandeur of the garden planet in which the Creator has placed us: "The Earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof!"