THE IDEA OF GOD AS AFFECTED BY MODERN KNOWLEDGE:

THE MODERN ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

AND THE EMERGENCE OF ECOLOGICAL THEOLOGY

The M. T. Garvin Lecture
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It is an honor for me to be asked to deliver this lecture in this distinguished series, which includes so many intellectual giants, among them Paul Tillich and James Luther Adams, former teachers of mine, to whom I continue to remain very much in debt. Indeed I would like to dedicate this lecture to them, with profound gratitude.

I begin with these familiar words of Robert Frost:

> Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
> That sends the frozen ground-swell under it,
> And spills the upper bowlders in the sun;
> And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.

Theology is no Divine science, construed in some timeless eternity, immune from the flux of time. Theology is a historical enterprise, built on the ground-swells of temporality, and hence always subject to change, always subject to the tectonic forces of human history, always in the process of breaking down so that new builders might put in place their own constructions, which, in their time, will also give way to the ground swells of human history beneath them.

I.

One of those ground-swells is the history of human perceptions and apperceptions of nature. The Hebrew Scriptures, for example, understand the drama of human history to be unfolding within a kind of vast cosmic bubble, surrounded by the impenetrable waters of chaos on every side. That

cosmology clearly shapes the Hebrew understanding of God. Yahweh, whatever else he is, is the God of majestic power, who can overcome even the most chaotic aspects of human experience. Hence it is no surpise to discover that the paradigmatic event for the Hebrew Scriptures is the Exodus exeprience, according to which a powerless people was delivered from overwhelming forces of political violence, through the chaotic experience of "the Red Sea waters."

In modern times, the history of human perceptions and apperceptions of nature has been most influential from the side of the natural sciences. The natural sciences, perhaps more than any other single cultural force, have become the ground-swell that has broken down the theological constructions of the past and opened the way to still newer theological constructions, as M. T. Garvin undoubtedly understood, when he endowed this lecture.

For us in these times, one of the most important issues, if not the singlemost important issue, is our concern for the environment, a concern which has itself largely been elicited by the various forms of contemporary ecological thought. Ours is an ecological era, as perhaps no other era in Western history has ever been, and for understandable reasons, since never before has the human species challenged the very well-being of its own home in the biosphere.

Under the impact of modern ecological thought, I want to argue, we are witnessing in our time a tectonic shift in Western theology. To illustrate this point, I want to take you on a brief tour into the experiential depths of Western thinking about God.

To that end, I begin at the surface, with the classic remark of some sage, whose name escapes me. But ~~I believe~~ he must have been a Unitarian: "I believe in the Fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the neighborhood of Boston." Whether Unitarian or not, that could be called the Credo of Protestant modernity, as I will show you presently. Today, however, under the influence of contemporary ecological thought, few Protestant thinkers of stature would give voice to such a Credo, even in its most sophisticated forms. The emerging theological consensus today, I will suggest, is this strikingly ecological Credo: "I believe in the Motherhood of God, the personhood of humanity, and the neighborhood of the earth."

Let me illustrate how it used to be. Theology in the West has been shaped by one intutition, perhaps more than any other. Call it the experience of the "overwhelming mountain," or in more abstract terms the construct of the Great Chain of Being. This topic was explored with great perspicacity by Arthur Lovejoy in his 1936 study by that name.(1) According to this classical Western way of thinking, reality is construed as a kind of mountain or a great interlinking hierarchy of being. At the apex is the One, the purely spiritual, unchanging, eternal Deity. In successive descending and expanding circles of being we see the purely angelic creatures, then that "mixed creature" which is partially spiritual and partially material, the human creature, next the animals, the plants, the material elements, and ultimately nonbeing. Reality according to this conceptuality is thus this hierarchical totality: the One and the Many.

Lovejoy points out, however, that this schema as we know it in Western thought, contains within it a fundamental contradiction. This has to do with the idea of God or the One at the apex. According to some, such as Aristotle, this One is the Unmoved Mover, "the Good," totally spiritual, and therefore totally separate, and infinitely removed, from the Many, especially those creatures which are material in any respect. So detached is the One from the world, according to Aristotle, that this Unmoved Mover does not even know that the world exists. According to others, such as Plotinus, the One, in contrast, is not separate and infinitely removed from the Many. Rather the One is overflowing Goodness, infinite creativity, constantly emanating into new forms of being.

Anyone who has ever stood at the top of a mountain like Mount Washington in New Hampshire, at high noon on a clear day, will instantly recognize the experiential matrix of this abstract conceptuality. If you look above, you see the ethereal regions of the heavens and you are blinded by the all-transcending sun. And you might be inspired to believe that God is like that sun. If, on the other hand, you look out and around and below, you see a rich world of manifold being at every level, a glorious panorama of fecundity. And you might be inspired to believe that God is like the sun, insofar as the sun's energy overflows upon all those creatures, and is, in a certain sense, the sustaining force of their being.

It is not too far from this kind of experience, which most contemporaries can recognize, to the primordial encounters with the Divine characteristic of primal religions around the world today, and extending

back to the earliest days of human history. Historians of religion have observed numerous manifestation of the Father Sky God and the Mother Earth Goddess. The one experience looks above to the Wholly Other ruler in the heavens. The other experience looks around to the embrace of the Wholly Near nurturer throughout the earth.

The Deity of much of Protestant modernity in the West was this kind of Father Sky God, the One or the Good, in the classical sense, the Deity which is Wholly Other, the exalted governor of human affairs and the cosmos more generally. It was no accident, surely, that this modern understanding of God gained prominence in a culture that was thoroughly influenced by the physics of Isaac Newton.

Newton was one of the great champions of the so-called "mechanical view of nature." According to this way of thinking, nature is like a machine. The human body, in particular, is like a machine. Nature is composed of dead particles, inert matter, which lack color, smell, and taste. The latter are "secondary qualities." Beauty, in a word, is in the eye of the beholder. The awe-inspiring experience of a glorious sunset, for example, is mainly stirred up in the soul of the observing human subject, according to this mechanistic way of thinking.

God, moreover, according to the same schema, is the great, cosmic Watchmaker. God brings the world into being, sets it running, and the world more or less runs by itself. This Deity of mechanistic thinking is thus reminiscent of the Father Sky God of primal experience, and the One or the Good of classical hierarchical thought in the West. This Deity is the Maker of all things, but is mostly known insofar as "He," and I use that pronoun advisedly, transcends the world of human experience, while at the same time "He" validates its lawfulness.

This Deity was also, historically speaking, in the modern West, very much the Deity of patriarchy and classism. He was "the Father," and "His" name was invoked to bless a hierarchial world. This is especially evident in the thought of turn-of-the-century liberals such as Adolf von Harnack. The Deity of 19th century Protestant liberalism was a Deity whose name was invoked not only to celebrate the lawfulness of nature and progress in human history. This mechanistic Father Sky God was also the Deity that, by default if not by doctrine, was understood to bless child labor, the degradation of women, the oppression of persons of color and the poor more

generally. "Der liebe Gott," Paul Tillich used to call this ostensibly benign watchmaker Deity. This was the Deity invoked in many Protestant pulpits among the wealthy in this country and in Europe. This was the Deity that more or less sanctified the historical project of Western bourgeois society, for better or for worse.

Such was the legacy of the primordial Father Sky God and the classical One or the Good in the popular councils of Protestant modernity in the West. Hence the appropriateness of the Credo: I believe in the Fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the neighborhood of Boston.

II.

Now this Deity has been subjected to relentless and sometimes vehement criticism from many quarters, some of them from within the traditions of classical Western theology itself. One can think of the theological constructions of Paul Tillich in this respect, and of the theological ethics of James Luther Adams, likewise, arising mainly in the middle years of this century. Informed by thinkers such as Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx, theologians and ethicists such as Tillich and Adams sought to demolish the project of Protestant modernity, in the name of what Tillich called "the God beyond 'God.'" In this respect, "modern knowledge," to use M. T. Garvin's term, came to have a radical influence on the idea of God, mainly from the vantage points of psychology and sociology.

In our own time, coming to a public focus for the first time twenty years ago, with the first Earth Day in this country, what is perhaps a still more searching kind of criticism of the Deity of Protestant modernity has arisen, this time from the vantage point of ecological thought. According to the most fundamental canon of ecological thinking, "everything is related to everything else." The system of relationships takes precedence over individual entities. The whole, in this sense, is greater than the sum of the parts. Indeed, you cannot understand the parts if you do not grasp the whole. This kind of thinking prompted various critics to raise questions about the inherited religious traditions of Protestant modernity, especially as the awareness of our fast growing, global environmental crisis began to ~~grow~~ develop.

Things first came to a head in December, 1966, when a then little known Professor of History at the University of California gave a lecture

to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, entitled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." Lynn White, Jr.'s modest talk, first published in Science three months later, quietly sounded a theme which has developed into resounding roar, two decades later. He argued that Christian theology, due to its strong emphasis on the transcendence of God and on human dominion over nature, ought to be held culpable for the advancing environmental crisis in our time.

White's essay has taken on a kind of scriptural aura in the eyes of many protagonists of the Ecology Movement. It has naturally elicited many responses, both positive and negative. My own scholarly work, which began with my programmatic study, Brother Earth, in 1970, and has come to fruition in my 1985 historical survey of Christian attitudes toward nature in the book The Travail of Nature, was largely written in response to the kinds of questions raised by Lynn White.(3)

Whatever one might say about White's overall thesis, however, it seems indisputable that his argument is on target insofar as it addresses the kind of theology championed widely in modern Protestant thought. This kind of theology is highly spiritualistic and radically anthropocentric, as I have demonstrated in The Travail of Nature. It focuses on God and the human creature primarily in their spiritual transcendence over nature, even allowing the thought of their domination of nature.

And more. This kind of "Fatherhood of God, brotherhood of man, and neighborhood of Boston" theology is also androcentric -- that is, it is patriarchal -- and often elitist -- that is, it tends to hallow the structures of the established economic order.

White's critique in 1966 was informed by the then publicly emerging disciplines of ecology. Subsequent critiques, building on the White thesis, have been informed all the more by the insights of ecological thought. The cumulative impact of this kind of criticism has resulted in a kind of ground-swell beneath the constructions of Protestant theology in our time, in particular regarding the idea of God. In this respect we can see a clear shift away from the God of modern Protestant liberalism to a much more ecological, that is, relational, understanding of the Deity. This is the shift from the liberal Credo focusing on "The Fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the neighborhood of Boston," to a new, ecological, post-liberal Credo focusing on "The Motherhood of God, the

personhood of humanity, and the neighborhood of the earth."

Under the impact of contemporary ecological thinking, as that kind of disciplined reflection has been mediated to religious thinkers by critics such as Lynn White, we are witnessing a kind of tectonic theological shifting: from the hierachical idea of God as the Good or the all-transcending One, the sun at high noon shining brilliantly above the peak of the mountain, the Father Sky God: to the idea of God as the One who is overflowing Goodness, the Mother Earth Goddess, who emanates throughout the universe and embraces all things, the One in the Many and the Many in the One. In abstract terms, this can be called the shift from theism, on the one hand, to panentheism or even pantheism, on the other hand, from God the Wholly Other to God the Wholly Near.

This shift is nowhere more dramatically apparent than in the recent work of Sallie McFague, Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age.(4) McFague takes direct issue with the image of God as Wholly Other, and indeed seeks to argue that not only is God not Wholly Other but that the world is God's Body. She further images God not in the traditional trinitarian terms, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but in new feminist-ecological terms, as Mother, Lover, and Friend. All of this is intended to show that God is, as it were, the Whole which is greater than the sum of the parts, that God is the ultimate system of relationships which includes all other relationships, and that, therefore, those creatures that have been driven to the margins of church and society -- women, people of color, the poor, animals and other living creatures -- that all these are included in the Divine being and the Divine purposes. The Deity whom McFague depicts embraces all things rather than rules all things from above. The human creature whom McFague envisions is, accordingly, immersed in a system of relationships, first, with all other humans, but then also with all other creatures of this earth.

While McFague's work illustrates most dramtically the tectonic theological shift I have been describing, her constructions by no means stand alone. Indeed, long before her radical statement of the issues and her radical theological project had emerged, other pioneers had been moving in the same direction, many of them espousing similar themes, but with much less radical conclusions. Thought about God on the part of such pioneers has developed, interestingly enough, mainly in continuity with orthodox trinitarianism, which McFague's work itself illustrates, although from a

distance, insofar as she thinks of God as Mother, Lover, and Friend.

Thus the American Methodist theologian, John Cobb, has built on the insights of Alfred North Whitehead's process thought, to develop a process or ecological view of God as the Creative Ground of all reality.(5) The American Lutheran theologian, Joseph Sittler, has drawn on Greek Orthodox thought, and espoused a doctrine of Jesus Christ as Pantokrator, as the cosmic Christ, a theme well-attested in the Christian scriptures.(6) The German Reformed theologian, Juergen Moltmann, drawing on Jewish thought about the presence and the suffering of God, has developed an ecological understanding of the Holy Spirit as the Creative Spirit of God, that nurtures, shapes, and empowers all things.(7) Each of these thinkers, moreover, is very much aware of the issues raised by feminist and other liberationist theologians.

What we are witnessing here, to put this sharply, is the proclamation of the death of God in the midst of the quest for God, that is, the God beyond "God." In a variety of ways, all of them influenced to one degree or another by contemporary ecological thinking, theologians in our time have announced the death of the Deity of Protestant modernity, the demise of the Credo, "I believe in the Fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, the neighborhood of Boston," in favor of a new postmodern Credo, which few, to be sure, would accept word for word, as McFague does, but which many would take to be a much more adequate Credo than the one espoused by Protesant liberalism, namely: "I believe in the Motherhood of God, the personsonhood of humanity, and the neighborhood of the earth."

Something, said Robert Frost --

> Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
> That sends the frozen ground-swell under it,
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We have seen now how one particular ground swell of contemporary thought, driven by the ecological disciplines, has helped to spill the boulders of Protestant liberalism and its idea of God, and in so doing has prepared the way for new theological constructions of a more ecological character, obviously much more relevant to the crises of our times.

III.

Theology, then, as many of its practitioners have always realized, is indeed no Divine science, construed in some timeless eternity, immune from the flux of time. Theology is a historical enterprise, built on the ground-swells of temporality, and hence always subject to change, always subject to the tectonic forces of human history, always in the process of breaking down so that new builders might put in place their own constructions, which, in their time, will also give way to the ground swells of human history beneath them.

What is the lesson of all this? It is a liberating lesson, I believe. It highlights the freedom, the responsibility, and the imaginative vocation of theology. Our primary task is not the preservation of the so-called "deposit of faith" (the depositum fidei), but the explication of the faith we have received in terms of the issues of our day, as Paul Tillich and James Luther Adams taught us so creatively. Our primary task is to stay with the ground-swells of history, not to retreat to some allegedly safe and unshakable place in order to rebuild the structures that time has broken down: but to build anew, precisely at the point where the ground-swells have been most destructive, in order to construe some fragile structures of meaning for our own generation.

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1. Arthur Lovejoy, The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea (New York: Harper and Row, 1936).

2. Lynn White, Jr. "The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," Science (December 1967), pp. 1203-7.

3. H. Paul Santmire, Brother Earth: Nature, God, and Ecology in a Time of Crisis (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1970); idem, The Travail of Nature: the Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985). See also idem, "The Liberation of Nature: Lynn White's Challenge Anew," Christian Century (May 22, 1985), pp. 530-533.

4. Op. cit. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

5. See especially, John Cobb, Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology (Beverly Hills, CA: Bruce Books, 1972).

6. See especially, Joseph Sittler, Essays on Nature and Grace (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972).

7. See especially, Juergen Moltmann, God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God, tr. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985).