THE GOOD EARTH IN CRISIS:

CHRISTIANITY ON TRIAL

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I.

This past Monday, Joseph J. Hazelwood went on trial in Anchorage, Alaska. As captain of the Exxon Valdez last March, when that 987-foot tanker ran aground and spilled nearly 11 million gallons of oil in Prince William Sound, Hazelwood has been singled out as the only guilty party thus far.

That oil spill was shocking. Enough crude oil gushed from the hull of the Exxon Valdez to cover an area more than 1,000 miles long, or about half the coastline of the Eastern Seaboard. It is estimated that that spilled oil poisoned up to 250,000 sea birds and killed 1000 sea otters, making it the worst spill of its kind in history, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.(l)

Shocking, indeed. But far away. Deceptively isolated from your world and mine.

Consider your own kitchen, your own bathroom, your own garage. Last year, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, 180 million gallons of used motor oil was "mismanaged" -- sent to a landfill or poured down storm drains — by do-it-yourself oil changers. This is equal to 16 Exxon Valdez oil spills. Whom should we put on trial?

Toxic pollutants from households accounted for up to 20 per cent of all toxic wastes in muncipal sewage-treatment plants, according to the EPA. It is estimated that most households in the U.S. have as much as 50 to 100 pounds of hazardous material that should be disposed of only in a hazardous-waste site or properly recycled. Nobody really knows how many of these wastes are properly "managed," but probably most of them are not. Americans love to have clean toilets, clean drains, and clean ovens. Whom should we put on trial?(2)

Nearby, the plant that is part of the high-tech infrastructure of our military-industrial-agricultural economic system is doing its fair share in this respect, or much more than its fair share, since American industry and agriculture produce considerably more hazardous wastes than our households do, 250 million tons each year, about one ton per person.(3) These corporate forces, however, are only responding to consumer demand, we are told. Whom should we put on trial'

I want to suggest in this paper that all of us should be put on trial, especially those of us who identify with the Christian tradition.

II.

But some might say: why bother with the Christian faith at this point? Why not get on with the urgent practical issues of saving the earth? Why be concerned with merely intramural spiritual issues, of interest to an arcane few perhaps, but not of any critical importance otherwise? This often is the view of so-called hard-nosed scientists or so-called pragmatic policymakers. On the contrary, I take it as a given that policies of industrial and agricultural pollution, to focus again on this single environmental issue, and that individual habits of pollution, such as your prac tides with your toilet bowl, your kitchen drain, your oven, and your crankcase — that such policies and habits all reflect deep-seated values in our society and in our souls. Values shape policies and habits.

And values, in turn, are shaped by what you believe. While it is certainly true that you are what you eat, it is no less true that you are what you value and, still more fundamentally, you are what you believe. Credo ergo sum. thast

So in this highly polluting society, it is of critical importance what the millions of citizens who are Christians actually do believe, because that shapes our values, and those values in turn directly or indirectly influence social and economic policies with regard to the environment in this society, as well as individual habits and practices.

It could be, in other words, that one of the chief reasons why we have so much fouling of the environment in this society is because we have so many foul Christian values and foul Christian beliefs behind them.

Some have argued this point, impressively. They have charged that Christianity is one of the chief progenitors, perhaps the progenitor, of our environmental crisis. The classic argument was formulated by a historian, Lynn White, Jr., in a 1966 lecture, "The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis."

Modern science and technology, White argues, are profoundly rooted in the values of Western culture, values that have been shaped by Christian beliefs. White particularly points to Christian teaching about human dominion over nature. The most vivid expression of this idea is perhaps Psalm 8:

> 0 Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth! ....When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou has established: what is man that thou art mindful of him...? Yet thou has

made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor. Thou has given him dominion over the works of thy hands; thou has put all things under his feet. (Psalm 8:1-6)

The idea that humans were given dominion over the earth, White believes, lies behind the destructive and rapacious attitudes toward nature of modern Western society, shaped by values of domination and exploitation. White concludes, memorably, that Christianity must bear "a huge burden of guilt" for the contempoary environmental crisis.(4)

Throw your used oven cleaners in the trash, in other words. Flush your draino down the drain. Dump the oil from your crankcase behind the garage. Demand your Big Mac, with meat produced in the polluting feed lots of America, whenever you want one. Demand an aerosol for your hair spray that will make you look young and beautiful, at the push of a button. Insist on driving to work everyday, no matter how much noxious gas your vehicle produces. Because God has given you lordship over nature. These are the kinds of attitudes Lynn White has in mind, when he condemns the Christian tradition for what he considers to be its anti-enironmental bias.

Now the so-called Lynn White Thesis has been much disputed. Critics have pointed out that many societies that were not influenced by Christianity also devastated nature. Defenders of Christianity, in turn, have observed that it was precisely the abandonment of Christianity in the West, at the time of the enlightenment, and the rise of an unbridled secular spirit of domination, that most directly produced our environmental crisis.

Be that as it may, there is enough of a bite to the Lynn White Thesis so that those of us who are Christians cannot simply pass it by, as if it had no force at all. More to the point, what values for this ecological age are we Christians to champion? Or is Christianity, perchance, in this vital respect totally irrelevant, if not destructive? Does the Christian faith have anything helpful, anything constructive, to say to those who are seeking to respond to the predicament of our good earth in crisis?

III.

It all depends on how you look at it. In particular, it all depends on how you read the Bible, the source book of the Christian faith.

There is a way of reading the Bible that would suggest that the crisis of the earth will in all likelihood <u>not</u> be of much interest to Christians, except perhaps in emergency situations when human life itself is threatened. According to this way of reading the Bible, which we can call a<u>nthropocentric</u> -- centered on human life -- the chief interest of the Bible is the story of God's dealings with the human creature.(5)

Consider first the Genesis creation narratives. In Genesis, chapter one, we read about God bringing a beautiful world into being, which is good in every respect. When, finally, God creates human creatures in God's own image, as God had, notably, created no other creatures, then God sees that everything is "very good." When, further, God so creates humans in God's image, God also gives them "dominion" over the earth, and then commands: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it...." (Gen. 1:28). Biblical exegetes have pointed out that this is rather harsh language in the Hebrew. "Subdue" means something like "tread under your feet."

In Genesis, chapter two, moreover, we encounter many of the same themes, it would appear, according to this anthropocentric interpreation of the creation narratives. Adam, for example, is commanded to name the animals. The power of naming, in ancient times, was considered to be a profound one; it meant that you were in control, even that in some sense you were a creator of the identity of the other. Further, we see Adam and Eve set in the midst of the riches of the Garden. There they are to suffer no want or deprivation, but enjoy God and the fruits of the Garden forever. Or so it would appear, according to this reading of the story.

Then there is the larger question why God creates the world in the first place. Many biblical interpreters, such as the mid-century American Old Testament scholar, G. Ernest Wright, have taken it for granted that, for the Bible, the created world is a kind of stage on which the drama of human salvation is to be played out. From the Exodus to the Exile to the fulfilment of prophecy in the New Testament, according to Wright, God is lord over the world for the sake of God's special purposes with h umanki nd.

The same anthropocentric approach to the Bible has been evident in the church's interpretation of the New Testament. Consider Paul's great "christological hymn" in his letter to the Colossi ans (Paul, or a disciple of Paul), regarding the pivotal place of Jesus Christ in the purposes of God:

> He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation: for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities — all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the Church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.(Col. 1:15-19)

New Testament scholars have for some years agreed that Paul is here quoting a hymn that was used in the church at Co 1 ossae, much

as preachers sometimes quote hymns today in order to make a point that everyone in the church will the^better understand.

Some interpreters have argued, however, particularly German exegetes, that Paul's is a kind of hostile takeover, that what he does with the hymn when he quotes it shows that he isn't interested in what the hymn says at all. Paul adds two phrases to this hymn, they say, in order to change its meaning: "the Church," and "by the blood of the Cross." Paul, they argue, wanted to take the attention of these early Christians away from the cosmos -- "all things" -- and focus it on issues of human salvation and the mission of the church in this world. Hence, they point out, Paul emphasizes that Christ is the head of the Body, the Church, not the head of the cosmos as such, and hence Paul makes sure to say specifically that Christ does not simply reconcile all things by some cosmic process, like the passing of winter to spring, but by a historical event, the crucifixion.

Scholars who champion this kind of anthropocentric interpretation of the New Testament, moreover, also consider other passages that refer to the cosmos to be "mythological," that is, examples of primitive science or outdated philosophies that got into the New Testament more or less by accident, given the culture of the time. Thus texts such as Romans 8, where Paul talks about the groaning of the whole creation in travail, or Revelation 21, where John the Seer envisions the coming of a new heavens and a new earth, as well as a New Jerusalem, are discounted as having no theological relevance, as not being of the substance of the New Testament witness.

If this is what the Bible teaches us about our relationship with nature, as God would have it, then the critics may well be right. Christianity may indeed be more part of the problem, than part of the solution, as far as the the environmental crisis is concerned. Or if Christianity is not part of the problem, then it would seem to have nothing to offer, of any substance, that would help us find the ecological values this era would seem to require if we are to heal the earth and replenish the earth and respect the earth, and not merely approach it as a kind of stage or storehouse of resources, posited there for our convenience and for the purposes of providing us with sustenance, as we focus our attention on the really important issues of coxtMtc his to ry -- us.

IV.

But it all depends on how you look at it. There is another way of reading the Bible. I believe that the source book of our faith in fact mandates us to care about the crisis of the good earth, indeed to love the earth as we love ourselves.

It may be that the anthropocentric interpretation of the Bible that we have just reviewed is a legitimate interpretation. But it may also be the case, as I believe, that that

interpretation has outlived its usefulness, and that another equally legitimate, if not more legitimate, reading of the Bible is available, which has a rich ecological dimension.

We are, I believe, in a certain sense at the point of a new Reformation in our biblical interpretation. Against centuries of interpretation of the Bible that showed how the Bible teaches that you are saved both by what you believe and what you do, by faith and by works, Luther argued, No. You are saved by what you believe. Likewise, after centuries of interpretation of the Bible that showed how the Bible focuses chiefly on the story of God's history with humanity, it is possible for us to argue, No. The Bible is truly a book about the whole world, not just about humans.

Or better still. The Bible is a book about God , first and foremost, who has a purpose for the whole world, in the midst of which God chooses to call forth and to bless the human creature, in very special ways. This then is a theocentric interpretation of the Bible — centered on God and the universal purposes of God — rather than an anthropocentric interpretation, focusing on God's purposes with humankind alone.

On the face of it, that is the way the Bible reads. It begins in the Book of Genesis with the story of God creating a world, and it ends in the Book of Revelation with the story of God bringing into being a new world, a glorified new heavens and a new earth in the midst of which is to be found the new Jerusalem, the community of humankind. The fact that the Bible is put together that way, from alpha to omega, beginning to ending, as the story of God's history with the whole world, ought to tell us something.

Then when we turn particularly to texts such as Genesis one and two, we can see this overriding purpose illustrated clearly. Notice that in Genesis one God creates communities of interrelated beings, and that God is said to see that each of these communities is "good." And it appears that God is depicted here as taking a kind of esthetic delight in all the fruits of the Divine creativity. The stars and the creeping things and the sea monsters are "good," in other words, not because they are "good for something," namely, that they serve some useful purpose for us, but because they are good for God. They serve God and reflect the glory of God.

Further, when we come to the place at the end of chapter one, where God is said to see that everything created is "very good," note the actual words of the text: "And God saw e ve ryth ing that he had made, and behold, it was very good." (Gen. 1 :31) The text does not say: and God saw the human creature, and behold everything was therefore very good, although some Christian interpreters have read it that way.

Now, it is true, Genesis one does talk about "subduing" th e

earth, and that is evidently a very strong word. But consideration must be given to the context here. This idea was set forth in a society where the issue of human survival was in fact whether humans could marshal enough resources from the earth to be able to sustain themselves through droughts and floods and other natural calamities. Like all ancient societies, Hebraic society — except for the very few at the top — was in the best of years merely a subsistence society, not a surplus society. Know ledge about agriculture and related kinds of technology was limited. In this situation the command to subdue in fact meant to "get by as best you can," not to dominate or to destroy.

In any case, that emphasis on "subduing" was dramatically balanced by an emphasis on "caring." This is the significance of the second creation story of Genesis two: "And the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it."(Gen. 2:15) The nuance here is not that the Garden is Adam's property; actually the Bible does not have a concept of private property as we understand it, since "the earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof."(Ps. 24:1) The nuance here is that the Garden is given to Adam as a living trust, as a responsibility to the God of all things, who has purposes with all things, so that the human creature might work with the Creator, might image-forth the care of the Creator for all things.

That is why God makes a covenant with all things, according to the Noah story, with "all the birds and animals," (Gen. 9:10) as well as with Noah and his descendants. God's ultimate purpose is making peace with all things, to bring the whole world to its final glorious rest, its lasting Shalom, where the lamb will lie down with the lion, and a little child shall lead them.

This biblical concern for cosmic peace is then taken up in the New Testament. We see hints of it in the teaching of Jesus, where we are told to consider the lilies of the field. But all the more so we see it explicitly in passages such as Colossians one and Revelation 21. Whereas it is probably the case that Paul took over a cre ation-hymn from the liturgy at the Church at Colossae, it is by no means clear that he meant to deny the plain references of the hymn to God's purpose with all things, through the vocation of the cosmic Christ. This is no hostile takeover, on Paul's part. This is a friendly amendment, this accent on the Church as the body of Christ and on the blood of the Cross. Had Paul meant to deny that Christ is the center of the cosmos, in whom all things cohere, Paul would have surely said so, or he would have conveniently found a way not to quote the Colossian hymn. Paul stands squarely in that Hebraic tradition that we see in Genesis one and two, which envisions the ultimate Divine purpose as having to do with the whole world, and, yes, with a special relationship with the human creature in the midst of that world, but with the whole world from beginning to ending nevertheless.

This is why Paul states so clearly in Romans 8 that the whole creation is groaning in travail, as it awaits its liberation, akin to the liberation of the children of God. This is why, likewise, the Book of Revelation ends with a vision of the new heavens and the new earth, not just a new Jerusalem, as the glorious ending of the whole Divine history with the world.

We have every reason to believe, as well, that Jesus himself held some such "eschatological" or "apocalyptic" vision of the ending of the the whole world, that he anticipated a world salvation, a coming cosmic renewal, as Paul did. That was a commonplace idea in the Jewish circles of his day. We see signs of that view in Jesus' references to the "cosmic banquet" in heaven, which He and many other faithful Jews of his time took for granted as the centerpiece of the coming new heavens and new earth.

V.

Where does this kind of theocentric reading of the Bible leave us, as far as our environmental values are concerned? Perhaps the answer to this question can be best summarized this way.(6) According to this theocentric reading of the Bible, we are called to cooperate with nature, not to dominate nature. We are to think of the human creature no longer as homo faber , but now as homo cooperans.

According to this way of reading the Bible, nature belongs first and foremost to God, who has God's own purposes with nature, which we may never understand. But insofar as we intersect with those purposes, God would have us be servants of His mysterious purposes with nature, not lords over nature for the sake of our own well-being.

Surely there are canons of human justice and legitimate human need which God would have us consider. Sometimes human life will and should take precedence over animal life and plant life. That truth the Bible surely takes to be self-evident. But the norm in such instances will always be the norm of sufficiency — enough — not the norm of accumulation — wealth. And that norm of sufficiency will always be implemented in humility: which means respecting the rights of all other creatures to life and fulfilment of their own, which God has given them.

Now this is not yet an ethical program that I am presenting here. This is not yet a fully fleshed out social or individual environmental ethic, by any means. I have been much more concerned in this context with what we be 1i eve than with what we value , and how those values should be translated into the concrete situation in which we find ourselves today, both in terms of social policy and individual lifestyle.

Nor have I even touched on another great theme of the Bible,

which must shape our moral practice as Christians, at every point, the preferential option for the poor. It is scarcely biblical for us to continue to live "high off the hog," so to speak, and then to turn to our impoverished brothers and sisters in the Third World and to tell them not to industrialize as we did, because of global warming or other such environmental problems.

But my purpose has been more fundamental. It has been a theological purpose: to show that when Christianity is put on trial in this world of advanced environmental crisis, it is possible to argue, whatever we might say about the past, that our tradition can be read as a profoundly ecological tradition, because it is rooted in a belief system that focuses on a vision of God who is the creator and redeemer and sanctifier of all things, not just humans, and because the human creature is a creature not a god, a creature called by God to be responsible to nature, not to dominate nature.

In this respect, I believe, in this time when the good earth is in crisis and Christianity if on trial, the Christian faith can be judged to be a potential force for potent ecological good, if only Christians themselves will understand their own faith in this way. It all depends on how you look at it.

Ponder these thoughts next time you read about an ocean oil spill. All the more so^ ponder them next time your reach for your Draino or your Easy Off, " or next time you are thinking what to do with the oil you've just drained from your crankcase. Because, if I am right, the Bible tells you so.

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(1) Timothy Eagan, "Trial Opens for Ex-Tanker Captain...," New York Times, January 29, 1990.

(2) Elizabeth A. Brown, "Hazardous-Waste House Cleaning," Christian Science Monitor, January 23, 1990.

(3) See the discussion in Keeling and Healing the Cre a t i o n , A Resource Paper Prepared by the Presbyterian Eco-Justice Task Forces (Louisville: Presbyterian Church[USA]), p. 34.

(4) See H. Paul Sant mi re, "The Liberation of Nature: Lynn White's Challenge Anew," Christian Century, May 22, 1985, pp. 530-533.

(5) For the following sections, see my book The Travail of Nature: the Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theo 1ogy (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

(6) For the development of these thoughts, see my paper, "Healing the Protestant Mind: Beyond the Theology of Dominion." (fo rthcoming)