BY DR. PAUL SANTMIRE

Religion Seen as Ecology Hope

Dr. H. Paul Santmire, chaplain of Wellesley College in Wellesey, Mass., is a theologian who has long been associated with the ecology movement. His doctoral dissertation was on Karl Barth's theology of nature; he is author of two books, a member of the Executive Committee of the Faith, Man, Nature Group and teaches courses on religion and ecology at Wellesley. Dr. Santmire was one of the delegates to the recent environmental conference sponsored by the U.S. National Commission on UNESCO in Atlanta. Constitution reporter Chuck Bell asked Santmire to comment on several aspects of the current environmental crisis from a theological viewpoint.

QUESTION: Dr. Santmire, would you say that there are moral and religious aspects to the ecology crisis?

SANTMIRE: This is one very important aspect of the situation that is frequently overlooked. Along with a great deal of pollution of our external environment there is a great deal of pollution of our internal environment in our attitudes not only towards the natural world but towards the rest of the planet on which we live and the people in our world. In this country we have had a long division between those who have been interested in nature and those who have been interested in so-called progress within the cities. Out of one group comes the conservationist movement and out of the other comes the industrial development movement. There is a radical dichotomy developing in our day between those who are in favor of social justice and those who favor keeping our rivers clean or making them clean and saving endangered species. There are values implicit in both of these. One group wants to clean up our rivers for the rivers' sake and the other wants to clean up our cities and make them better place in which to live.

It's my feeling that there is some kind of a transcendent reference, some kind of traditional yet revised belief in God that will enable us to bring together both of these facets — the interests in environment in terms of nature and in terms of our living spaces in our cities and in the third world.

Q: In view of the fact that pollution is really a worldwide problem, do you think that combating it effectively is going to require the formation of a world government?

A: We are already into the process, as exemplified by this conference and the United Nations, of moving toward international cooperation, but I think most people would agree that we have a long way to go. I think more than right now looking toward international government and institutions, every nation should be working within its own boundaries to undercut the tendencies we have had in the past towards nationalism.

We have to learn to question the validity of nationalism and the artificial division of our global village. We have to realize that we are all together on this spaceship and that our fates are inseparably bound up with one another.

Q: In the area of population, do you think that one way to at least lessen the severity of the ecological crisis would be to bring about zero population growth or even a reduction in the population?

A: This whole question of population growth is very complex. There are a couple of things, I think, that ought to be said about that. There should be a distinction made between population growth in the United States and population growth in another part of the world. So far as population growth is concerned in India or Latin America, we have to realize that not very much is going to be done about this until their economic situation improves. And they're the ones who are in the best position to judge what is best for them. If they ask us for aid, we certainly ought to give it to them.

I think our major concern in the area of population should be in our own country.

Q: Do you, as a theologian, agree with the charge that many people are making now that the Protestant work ethic is responsible for the materialism of Western society and hence the pollution?

A: I think it's definitely played a role. The Protestant ethos has encouraged people to go out in the world and build their kingdoms to show forth the glory of God by the fact that they have succeeded.

> ***'. . . We have 6 per cent of the world's population, and we consume 50 per cent of the world's natural resources. From the point of view of so-called underdeveloped countries, this is pure and simple robbery. . .'***
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> ***—Dr. H. Paul Santmire***

Testament says to beware of Mammon.

Q: You obviously think that the environmental crisis can be combated perhaps even reversed, but do you think it will be? Are you optimistic about our chances to avoid an ecological catastrophe?

A: In terms of probability, my own judgement is that we have a slim chance for survival. When I consider the tremendous power groups that are wedded to the present system, and when you consider that environmental education has been very low not only in our country but around the world, you can become very pessimistic. And match this against the fact that some of the trends that are leading to ecological catastrophy have to be reversed within the next three to four decades it gives you pause to think about the future of this planet.

I am an optimist on the basis of my religious convictions which tell me that, ultimately, God is in charge of the world and He gives each one of us so much to do. I am going to do my little bit. I am going to do all I can, with whatever resources I have, to make an impact wherever I can.

If I begin to calculate the possibilities that we are going to get ourselves out of this mess, I sometimes become very low.