SAVING GOD'S GIFTS: ACCEPTING RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR NATURAL AND SPIRITUAL ENVIRONMENT

Theses for an Environmental Ethic*

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I. The Biblical Tradition is Not Responsible for the Global Environmental Crisis.

II. The Human Will to Dominate All Creatures Is Responsible for the Global Environmental Crisis.

III. The Human Will to Dominate All Creatures Must Be Checked.

IV. A Human Will to Cooperate With All Creatures Must be Cultivated.

V. An Ethic of Checks and Cooperation Must Be Translated into Middle Axioms, Which in Turn Can Shape Concrete Social and Environmental Policy-Making.

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* For references in this presentation, see H. Paul Santmire, The Travail of Nature: the Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

In a 1967 essay, which has been cited hundreds of times by critics in the last two decades, historian Lynn White, Jr. put forth the thesis that the biblical tradition in the West lies at the roots of the contemporary global ecological crisis. Although this argument has been rejected or refuted from many perspectives, it has become such a mainstay of popular thought about the environmental crisis in our time, that any argument predicated on biblical traditions, such as the following, must begin with "the White thesis," if it is going to be heard and understood beyond a small circle of theological specialists.

In a sense, the whole argument of my 1985 study, The Travail of Nature, is a response to the White thesis. For the purposes of our discussion tonight, therefore, I need only summarize the findings of that study -- which White himself would seem to have accepted (see the dust cover endorsement of the book).

I identify two major cycles of Christian thinking about nature, which have set the stage, implicitly, for two major approaches to environmental ethics. The one cycle is anthropocentric and spiritualistic. The other cycle is theocentric -- that is, focused on God and the purposes of God for all things -- and ecological -- that is, expressing a vision of human life, as well as the Divine Life, as essentially embedded in the world of nature. For tonight, I will refer to the first tradition as Tradition A, the anthropocentric-spiritualistic tradition, and the other as Tradition B, the theocentric-ecological tradition.

Which brings me to my first thesis: The Biblical Tradition is Not Responsible for the Global Environmental Crisis. Why? Because there are in fact two traditions in the Bible. Someone or some group or some social class or some culture, or some combination of individuals, classes, and cultures, has chosen to draw on Tradition A, rather than Tradition B, in order to justify some pre-theological agenda of some kind. So, for example, the biblical image of "man's dominion," as it has been expressed -- and distorted -- in infinite ways, has suited the convenience of some, whereas the conviction that the earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof has been conveniently deemphasized or utterly abandoned at the same time.

Some years ago a distinguished historian of the Reformation at Harvard startled a group of colleagues by observing that while there is a Freudian interpretation of Luther, there is also a Lutheran interpretation of Freud. Or, perhaps as Marx set Hegel on his head, so Luther might be allowed the privilege of setting Freud on his head. In this spirit, I would like to set Lynn White, Jr. on his head. That is to say, having shown how it can be argued that his thesis is only true in part, even if one does accept the kind of approach to historical causality he presupposes, I want to side with the biblical traditions to interpret the world in which Lynn White Jr., and all the rest of

us, live.

I proceed, then, to my second thesis: the human will to dominate all things is responsible for the global environmental crisis. For some reason, Adam sinned. Whatever prompted him to do that, whether it was pride (as Augustine thought) or fear of death (as Ernest Becker believed), the operational significance of his act was that he sought control over his life in such a way that none other, neither God, nor Eve, nor any other creature would have any control over his life. Adam, as it were, sought to "lord it over" everything else and everyone else. Which is to say, original sin is not lust for pleasure, as popular Christian art has taught some to assume, but the will to dominate.

The state of hierarchy, therefore, according to this understanding of original sin, is the primordial human state outside the Garden. Whether the first historical expression of this human alienation from God is sexual, racial, economic, military, or natural -- whether the earliest and most influential form of the human will to dominate all things takes the form of the domination of women by men (Rosemarey Ruether), one race by another (James Cone), one class by another (Karl Marx), or the world of nature by humans (many environmentalists), is a secondary question. The will to dominate, in any case, is the root human problem.

That will, in one form or another, is responsible for the environmental crisis. It presupposes indifference to nature, ignorance of nature, and an approach to nature as sheerly the resources for supporting the human will-to-power.

Note that I am not arguing that it is faulty human institutions that lie behind the global environmental crisis, although doubtless we have many faulty institutions. Those institutions, whether they be capitalist or socialist, are all corrupt, biblically speaking, because they are predicated on the human will to power.

Which then leads me to my third thesis: the Human Will to Dominate All Things Must Be Checked. I choose this language carefully. For, on the basis of biblical traditions, one might have been expected to say that the human will to dominate all things must be transformed. I believe that it must be, and that it has been. That is what the Christian doctrine of salvation teaches us. But I do not believe that the Christian doctrine of salvation should be or can be the single basis for an environmental ethic, even for Christians.

The theologians of the Reformation period in Christianity, such as Martin Luther, espoused the doctrine of so-called "orders of preservation" as one way of giving expression to biblical traditions. This doctrine, although it was subject to abuse, and indeed was abused in the most demonic of ways, did have at least this merit: that it pointed to the sustaining activity of God in

a sinful world. One of the ways that God responded to human sinfulness, in other words, was to seek to restrain it by projecting sustaining structures in human life, the state, various human institutions, especially the family. God, Luther believed, is constantly working to restrain disorder. In other words, God is constantly at work to check the results of the human will to dominate all things.

This gives us the theological mandate to presribe the ethical norm that the human will to dominate all things must be checked.

I take it that this norm, in turn, has both ideological and socio-political implications.

Ideologically, the norm of checking the human will to dominate all things means the most radical form of social criticism or truth-telling, as the Letter to the Ephesians suggests: "Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them." (Eph. 5:11) To begin with, the errors of romanticism (that the root problem of humanity is faulty institutions, a la Thoreau) or cynicism (that the root problem of humanity is sheer disorder, a la Hobbs), must be exposed.

Then the root problem of humanity itself, the universal human will to dominate, must be identified in its concrete hierarchical expressions: sexism, racism, classicism, militarism, and specieism. It must be identified and criticized for what it is.

With social criticism of this sort must then come a constructive attention to human institutions, which themselves can function as "orders of preservation," which themselves can help to check the universal human will to dominate.

One can speak a word of favor here, in this year of the bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution, for that document and its ideological assumptions. The American experiment, as it is expressed in the Consitution, and as it has been shaped by the sentiments of thinkers such as Madison, is predicated on a system of checks and balances. This is the kind of thing I have in mind in this context. A constitutional government wrought in Madisonian form is a government where the human will to dominate all things is held in check by dividing its operational impetus in such a way as to be able to oppose it, variously, to itself. This, in principle, and at least in some instances in practice, allows the less destructive, albeit much more feeble impulses of the human spirit, to have some influence in human affairs.

A problem, however, is that with Madisonian constitutionalism in America the system of checks and balances was not carried far enough: the human will to dominate all things was left virtually unchecked as it was directed to the world of nature. According to the ideology of the American

experiment, nature was the Great Frontier, where a virtually unlimited praxis of domination was not only allowed, but frequently celebrated -- even by a transcendental thinker such as Emerson. The implication of this line of argumentation is, then, that we need a bill of rights for nature, as well as for the human creature, and laws, thereafter, that seek to give that bill of rights concrete expression.

The thesis that the human will to dominate all things must be checked is by itself, however, not enough. By itself, it leaves us merely with an ethics of retraint, not with an ethics of encouragement. This is one of the serious weaknesses of neoconservative theology in our day. It exalts the negative so much so that it tends to overlook the possible. It lifts up checks and balances so much that everything tends to be seen as needing to be checked -- and as a result we are left with a theology of stasis, a theology which does not attune us, if I may say so, to "master the possibilities" that are given to us both in the common life and in the life of the community of faith. Such theologies predispose us to be suspicous of every change, since all things are, it is said, and rightly so, shaped by human sin. Neoconservative theology drives us finally in the direction of Hobbsean cynicism, just as some expressions of liberation theology drive us finally in the direction of utopian romanticism. And neither cynicism nor romanticism is a faithful expression of the biblical traditions.

Hence, in addition to the third thesis, that the human will to dominate all things must be checked, we require this fourth thesis: <u>the human will to cooperate with all things must be cultivated</u>.

Ideologically, to begin with, a vision of the ideal society, where the lamb lies down with the lion, and a little child leads them, must be projected. This is a world in which every creature has a certain, although not unlimited, right to be and to thrive. This is a world in which the highest human value is to become the servant of all, that is to say, the minister of the whole creation, and the celebrant of all. This is a world in which the right of the lilies of the field to survive and thrive is taken for granted, along side of the right of every human to survive and thrive, so that the whole creation can be seen as reflecting the glory of God. This is a world of universal cooperation, or ecological mutuality, not a world where some creatures lord it over others.

Such a vision of the ideal society, however, cannot be left to stand, somehow, by itself. Utopia as an ideal always is utopian, in the pejorative sense, if no attempt is made to embody the vision in practice.

Hence this ethic of universal cooperation, which is to be projected over against the given ethic of universal domination, must perforce find some kind of concrete social embodiment, if it

is to have any significantly constructive social impact. In this context, one would hope that many Christian churches would venture to be like "a city set upon a hill," that is, an exemplary community of cooperation, both spiritually and naturally. In the same vein, one would hope that people of good will everywhere might band together to create "demonstration projects" of human cooperation, with both political and ecological components.

This leads me, finally, to my fifth thesis: An ethic of checks and cooperation must be translated into middle axioms, which in turn can shape concrete social and environmental policy-making.

You shall know them by their fruits! Any ethic, environmental or otherwise, must be tested by its usefulness and its positive impact in the marketplace of human interaction.

A middle axiom is an ethical norm that stands halfway between abstract ethical norms and the concrete world of social reality. Love your neighbor as yourself, for example, becomes, at one point in some Third World context, "develop poison-free forms of labor-intensive agriculture in order to grow food to feed the hungry and to make possible new forms of community life" or "restructure the Brazilian economy so that the poorest have the housing and the food and the education and the work and the rich cultural life that they need and so that it will no longer be necessary for people to keep cutting down the rain forests."

The process of projecting middle axioms should be predicated on the one hand on a familiarity with the ethic of checks and balances and the ethic of cooperation and with their expressions in experimental communities and demonstration projects, and on the other hand on a familiarity with the concrete world of socio-environmental realities.

In conclusion, I might observe that I hope that all this, each of these theses, will be heard, as ethical reflections on this one single biblical theme: the earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof. I invite your questions about my approach and each individual thesis. I offer these theses to you as one concrete way of saving God's gifts, by accepting responsibility for both our natural and our spiritual environment.