

ECOLOGICAL COMMITMENT AS THEOLOGICAL RESPONSIBILITY

by Joseph Sittler

There are two reasons why this will not be a long speech. First, I understand that I am here to excite a discussion, not to preempt one. Second, consideration of so large a matter in so short a time requires that we be very precise about theology and ecology. I intend to make an effort in that direction.

Dr. Wald's address has made it unnecessary for me to review any of the polluted facts of the case. If we can neither read nor listen, we can all see and smell. From Dr. Wald's remarks, even the offhand ones, it is clear that there is an economics of ecology. There obviously is emerging a politics of ecology. There is already a well-developed statistics of ecology. There is an aesthetics of ecology and a history of it. And there is also a biology and a botany and a chemistry of ecology.

I have been asked to speak about a theology of ecology or a theology for ecology, and I want to make a distinction. A theology *for* ecology is obviously demanded by the facts of the case. But it is rather a theology *of* ecology that I want to talk about. For if we start talking about a theology *for* ecology, we will try to manufacture out of uncriticized theological categories consequent moralistic efforts stretched to enclose new and crucial facts. Such an effort will not really be a redoing of theology in view of ecology but only an extension of traditional ethics in the presence of crisis. If that should happen, and if uncriticized fundamental categories are simply reassessed and extended, we will get ecology in the textbooks on systematic theology probably as one part of eschatology! I can already envision the busy Jehovah's Witnesses adding to the *eschaton*, which they so gleefully anticipate, the ecological disintegration as the divine mechanism of catastrophe!

A theological analysis can therefore omit further talk about the facts because *Life* magazine can outphotograph the theologians, *Look* magazine has recently demonstrated that it can certainly outdramatize them, *Time* magazine can outinterview and propagandize the theologians, and

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the scientists certainly outreach and outproduce empirical data about this matter. And that is their proper business.

My task is to suggest a series of propositions, which I trust are derived from catholic, Christian, and biblical theology, and so put these before you as to help excite discussion and focus it, to open the mind to old and perhaps forgotten, or in some cases forcibly suppressed, aspects of the venerable classic theology of the church. To open the mind toward these aspects which now stand before us with terrible necessity calls for fresh theological reflection as we behold and think and feel the world. Observe, I do not say behold and think *about* the world, but behold and think and feel the world! And that helps introduce my first point, which is to state the theological position from which I think this subject can be most fruitfully approached.

The notion of God which was presupposed in Dr. Wald's reference to the "tribal God of Israel" is not the one we operate with. It is not the one the Bible operates with very long, either. The God of prophet, psalmist, Our Lord Jesus Christ, and Saint Paul and Saint John, is conceptually a considerable distance beyond the notion of the tribal God. The notion of God, which most adequately, comprehensively, and dynamically gathers up the vast biblical witness, is very close to John Calvin's statement, "The God who is the Fountain of all livingness." It has never occurred to me that my understanding of God could be threatened by galaxies or by light years. A new precision about the structure of the physical universe is not in fact disintegrative of a biblical understanding of God, but rather tends to be illustrative of it. I have never been able to entertain a God-idea which was not integrally related to the fact of chipmunks, squirrels, hippopotamuses, galaxies, and light years! All of this came forcibly to my attention sometime ago when a student in one of my classes interrupted a lecture to say, "But look, how can *anything* mean if *everything* doesn't?" which I regard as a fundamental theological question.

It seems to me that we are pretty much in the same situation, culturally and theologically, as the world of the West in the fourth century. Some of you know Charles Norris Cochran's *Christianity and Classical Culture* (the subtitle is *A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine*).¹ He says that the world of the fourth century required a new *arche*, a new *principium*. The fundamental notion of *Romanitas* which has held the world of antiquity together had virtually been drained of integrity, of force, and of any sealing and adhering content. And therefore, as Cochran puts it, the massive achievement of Saint Augustine was so to interpret the doctrine of the Holy Trinity that

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the whole of creation, the drama of redemption, and the residency of God's spirit within mankind were made understandable again as a reality to men of his time. And it lasted for one thousand years.

We are, it seems to me, in some such situation as we confront this problem. No surface tinkering with theological categories or no ever-so-petulant or patient tugging with ethical categories will really do. We are confronted with a task, as Philip Hefner has put it, of "relocating the God-question"² in such a way that the relocation is undertaken within the ecological situation including, of course, anthropological and historical self-understanding. But such relocation as puts the question at the point where the student asks, "How can anything mean if everything doesn't?" will demand such a fresh proposal of God-meaning as matches the size of the question.

FRESH PROPOSALS ON THE QUESTIONS OF REALITY

So the first proposal I want to make is that the question of reality is itself an ecological question! Because the question is ecological, reality itself must be spoken of ecologically. Reality is known only in relations. This statement conflicts with the very structure of a good deal of post-Enlightenment thought in the Western world. I mean by such a statement that we must think it possible that there is no ontology of isolated entities, or instances, of forms, of processes, whether we are reflecting about God or man or society or the cosmos. The only adequate ontological structure we may utilize for thinking things Christianly is an ontology of community, communion, ecology—and all three words point conceptually to thought of a common kind. "Being itself" may be a relation, not an entitative thing.

This notion, carried that far, is really not, I think, discontinuous with the biblical story of Creation, of the speech about God, or man, or the cosmos, or of the drama of redemption. It belongs to the "story-character" of the biblical mode of expression that things are what they are declared to be only in relation to other things. There is no definition of God in the Bible. Calvin's statement responsibly reflects this: "He is the fountain of all livingness." God is the name for that one from whom all things flow. Man is what he is because he is related to that one. The fundamental term *imago Dei* is not a term that points to a substance, an attribute, or a specifiable quality, but one which specifies a relation. The fundamental terms of the Scripture—God, man, love, sin, hate, grace, covenant—are all relational words. The same fountain of life brings into being, we are told, all that is. That is, man has what being he has among things, and with things, and in a par-

ticular sense among his fellowmen. He is an ecological entity in relation. If one goes through, then, the words with which the Scripture talks about man and God and life and the world and history, he finds these relational terms the central disclosive and operational terms: restoration, redemption, salvation, faith, hope. Each of these is a term that points to the establishment of a relationship, or the breaking of a relationship, or the perversion of a relationship; and each one points to the promise of blessedness as the reestablishment of a relationship. So much for the first suggestion.

Second, reality-as-relation demands a beholding of actuality which is appropriate to the structures of reality thus beheld. I use the word "beholding" with some calculation. The new dictionaries, which play so fast and loose with old distinctions, play extraordinarily fast with this one. They say, "to behold," that is, "to see, to look." One can only lament this obtuseness! When the New Testament, for instance, reports Jesus as saying, "Behold the lilies of the field," one is precisely *not* saying, "Look at those lilies!" The word "behold" lies upon that which is beheld with a kind of tenderness which suggests that things in themselves have their own wondrous authenticity and integrity. I am called upon in such a saying not simply to "look" at a nonself but to "regard" things with a kind of spiritual honoring of the immaculate integrity of things which are not myself. "To behold" means to stand among things with a kind of reverence for life which does not walk through the world of the nonself with one's arrogant hat on. Therefore, to "behold" actuality from the standpoint of reality understood as relational is not just a quip of language; it is rather a rhetorical acknowledgment of a fundamental ecological understanding of man whose father is God but whose sibling is the whole creation. To stand beholding means that one stands within the Creation with an intrinsically theological stance.

This way of regarding things is an issue that the religious community has got to attend to before it gets to the more obvious moral, much less the procedural and pedagogical, problems. For we must somehow bring under question the notion that man in his historical entity, his individual selfhood, is so set apart from the rest of God's Creation that he can deal with it with Olympian arrogance as if it had no selfhood of its own by virtue of the Creation. Unless somehow we recover and fashion anew a religious consciousness which disintegrates this, we shall only accomplish a sufficient cleaning up of industrial procedures to secure profits and a reasonably comfortable life for one generation or so, and fail to penetrate the heart of the problem.

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This penetration of what Saint Paul calls the "spirit of our minds" is the fundamental task of the religious and theological responsibility in the ecological issue. And this applies all the way to such issues as the way we regard water (that it may be clean), air (that it may be pure), and things (that they be allowed to live and be their unperverted and undistorted existence). G. K. Chesterton somewhere affirms that there is something primitive in man which ought to enjoy the *thingliness* of things—"the sheer steeliness of steel, and the unutterable mud-diness of mud!"

Let us look at this matter from another angle. There is a given integrity built into the variety that issues forth from the fountain of life. And all integrity in man can only be kept uncorrupted when and insofar as he honors the integrity in the thingliness of the thing itself. I have some hope that this is a growing acknowledgment; and I locate that hope not so much in the homiletical or theological community as in the artistic community. One of the contributions of Picasso to my generation has been that he held starkly, interestingly, and fascinatedly before us what Chesterton called the thingliness of things. Why are people so fascinated with Picasso's mandolins? Because he paints a mandolin in such a way that, with visible simultaneity, one sees it all sides at once, inside, outside, topside, bottomside. The very thingly "mandolinness" of mandolins is what he wants to announce, a visual statement that is continuous with Gertrude Stein's effort when she says that "a thing is a thing is a thing," "a rose is a rose is a rose." Both the painting and the statement are a kind of artistic homage to the variety and the integrity of the creator. It is an appeal to permit color to be what it is, texture what it is, and let things celebrate their thingliness. Mies van der Rohe said about architecture that we should let steel celebrate the particular quality of steel by not making it do what wood ought to do, or glass ought to do, or some other thing ought to do. This is reverence for the creation by an act of intelligence and craftsmanship.

Third, an ontology of relations begets a beholding in relations, and this begets a thinking in relations. In this matter some reconstruction, it seems to me, and some demolition, too, have got to take place in the spirit of our minds. Why is it so hard for the Christian, and to some degree also the Jewish community, to get through their theological heads the idea that because one has a God relationship whose nature is called "spiritual" this category has so little to do with the category "natural"? I think I see one reason: Christianity proudly presents itself as a historical religion. The episodes that mark its emergence, the stories which convey its tradition, the stories and episodes whereby the

constitutive community reports itself to us in the earliest documents—these are all historical data. The Christian believer is liable, therefore, to make an *opposition*, not just a distinction, between man-as-nature and man-as-history. This is the fateful separation which marks the post-Enlightenment community particularly. We suppose that redemption is a historical drama which leaves untouched and has no meaning for and cannot be celebrated in terms of the care of the Creation. This is a fundamental misunderstanding. Put it another way. A negative assessment of the world and man-as-nature and a solidification of this negation beget complete freedom of action toward the world of the Creation. And this freedom of action, unrestrained by any care for the Creation, can even be sanctified theologically as man's proper service of God—to be eager, busy, in his work with the world.

INTEGRATION OF THEOLOGICAL CATEGORIES

This separation inspires some embarrassing reminders. First of all, it no longer makes any sense to make this absolute distinction, much less separation, between man-as-history and man-as-nature. The behavioral sciences and the life sciences eliminate such a separation on the first page of any responsible textbook.

The second embarrassment occurs when we turn to the Scriptures. The basic terms of *hesed*, *tsedeq*, *charis* are words whose fundamental referent is the *cosmos* that God loves—primarily the human community, to be sure, but not in isolation from the rest of Creation. Creation is, as it were, an ecological event. Even the legend of the Creation in the first book of our Bible is presented in ecological context: God, and man, and the neighbor, and the whole earth as the garden for the exercise of both joy and labor! Salvation is an ecological word in the sense that it is the restoration of a right relation which has been corrupted. And observe, this drama of redemption is never satisfied with purely historical categories. We are embarrassed today because purely historical categories are no longer capable of operating sociologically or in the life sciences or in any other kind of descriptive science. And why? They have come to this incapacity because our generation has witnessed the drawing of the life and the vitality and the potentialities of *nature* into the realm of *history*. The life of nature is now pathetically open to the decisional life that man lives as a historical being. For the first time man has added to his natural curiosity and creativity a perverse aggressiveness whereby nature is absolutely suppliant before him in such a way that she lives by his sufferance and can die by his decision.

This possibility has actually never existed until our generation. That

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means that theological categories may no longer be only historical categories. They have got to deal with man as history and as nature; and, therefore, categories of creation, redemption, and sanctification have got to operate with the same scope as the fundamental categories of man and God. And this requires not only that Christian and Jewish *morality* shall be offended by pollution but that *theology* must do more; it must be reconceived, under the shock of filth, into fresh scope and profundity.

For your further reflection, I offer two texts which might give you concrete material to reflect upon. I suggest that you read Psalm 104. That song is an ecological doxology. Beginning with the air, the sky, the little and then the great animals, the work that man does upon the earth and the delight that he takes in it, the doxological hymn unfolds to celebrate both the mysterious fecundity that evermore flows from the fountain of all livingness, up to the great coda of the psalm in which the phrase occurs—"These all hang upon Thee." The word "hang" is an English translation of a word that literally means to "depend," to receive existence and life from another. These all *hang together* because they all hang upon Thee, "You give them their life, You send forth Your breath, they live." Here is teaching of the divine redemption within the primal context of the divine Creation. Unless we fashion a relational doctrine of creation—which doctrine can rightly live with evolutionary theory—then we shall end up with a reduction, a perversion, and ultimately an irrelevance as regards the doctrine of redemption.

The world is not God, but it is God's. Or to put the issue another way, nature and grace belong together. The old theology made a distinction that some of you grew up on—the distinction between created grace and uncreated grace. By created grace is meant the ecological matrix Psalm 104 talks about. When the psalm sings a doxology by and out of a man of the earth, there is a celebration of the grace which comes to man in virtue of the Creation and precisely because of man's placement in it. This man is not singing a doxology because he is a gaseous spirit with no relation to chipmunks and corn and wine and oil; these gifts are rather the matrix and occasion whereby he knows the joy out of which he now praises God as creature. Created grace is exactly the grace that inheres in the world by virtue of the fact that it is a creation of a gracious God.

Uncreated grace points to that specification, incandescence, concentration, humanization, and incarnation of grace which comes not as a naked nonhistorical or nonnatural word but precisely as a historical

man born of the Virgin Mary. The accent, in order to make *that* point, belongs not upon Mary but *born* of a woman. That is, of our common lot.

The second text that I think invites our reflection (and such reflections may lead us into that subbasement of theological formulations where these profound openings toward the future may take place) is the difficult eighth chapter of Romans—"The whole creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God." Does this not suggest that the Creation, in its suppliant and open way, waits for such human operation by men of faith as shall challenge them to be what they are called to be—sons of God—and not simply operators within the resources of the world?

One is not falling into words only in sentiment or poetic fancy but extrapolating from a clear theological position when he makes the affirmation that *Christianly* Lake Michigan must be regarded as "groaning in travail, waiting to be set free from its bondage of decay."

What strikes one, if he has worked for some years trying to call attention to this virtual demise of a vigorous doctrine of the Creation, is that it is difficult but possible to get men to understand that pollution is biologically disastrous, aesthetically offensive, equally obviously economically self-destructive, and socially reductive of the quality of human life. But it is a very difficult job to get even Christians to see that so to deal with the Creation is *Christianly* blasphemous. A proper doctrine of creation and redemption would make it perfectly clear that from a Christian point of view the ecological crisis presents us not simply with moral tasks but requires of us a freshly renovated and fundamental theology of the first article whereby the Christian faith defines whence the Creation was formed, and why, and by whom, and to what end. The word essential to such renovation is not the social, aesthetic, economic, or even scientific word, but the Christian word—blasphemy!

When a contemporary theologian argues that one must think in relation, and proposes an ontology of communion as more appropriate to our time than an ontology of entities, he is liable to be called at best eccentric, or in the middle range, a Teilhardian, or at worst a sentimental Franciscan. But I would recall with you that it was not Karl Rahner or De Lubac or Schillebeeckx or Charles Davis or Metz or any of the other theologians to whom this extraordinary college was host four years ago, but it was rather Saint Thomas who said, "Gratia non tollet naturam, sed perficit." Grace does not destroy nature but perfects it! So that if any of you is frightened lest he get hold of the wrong

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theological handle whereby to exercise this point, I give you an indubitably legitimate one. And if any of you feels left out, both Luther and Calvin quote Thomas with great approval on this point. Now, my last point.

AN ECOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF GRACE

I would suggest that ecology, that is, the actuality of the relational as constitutive of all that live, is the only theater vast enough for a modern playing out of the doctrine of grace. If we are to ask which of the comprehensive Christian doctrines is the one large enough and ready enough and interiorly most capable of articulating a theological relationship between theology and ecology, I would suggest that the doctrine of grace is the one. For grace, in our understanding of it, has to be reassessed over against the scope of the biblical use of the term. And reassessed, too, by a critical restudy of the formulations about grace in the history of Christian doctrine. Augustinian individualism may not be a sufficient schema for current proclamation to contemporary man, and puritan moralization of grace may come under equally critical scrutiny. The human reality in its contemporary operations with nature, when really deeply pondered, opens up new ways of understanding grace.

As we confront the black problem, for instance, we are somewhat surprised and a bit taken aback when we observe that our extension of gracious acceptance to the black man is often not met by him with what we regard a mutuality in grace or in goodwill. And I have often wondered why that is. I think it is because he properly reads us, knows that what we intend as we go out toward him is often in obedience to the moral doctrine that all men are our brothers; in which doctrine we acquiesce, under which necessary obedience we bow as with the granting of a gift, bestowing upon him, as if it were *ours*, our acceptance. And this is understood by him as a sanctified form of insult. That we by "Christian obedience" now invest him with that which we take as our "own" endowment and do this as an act of "grace" on our part creates an even greater distance between us. But if grace is understood ecologically as built into the whole constitution of the world of nature, society, and the life of man with fellowman, if grace is explicated from the standpoint of the doctrine of the creation as bringing forth life-giving *variety*, then a quite new way of beholding the world and our fellowmen comes into possibility. I then affirm not that *I* bestow grace or *I* invest with grace but that grace comes in black and white and yellow and red! Grace comes in colors. That is a quite different under-

standing of grace, for it is bound up with the unthinkable variety of God the Creator who loves all colors, textures, forms, nuances, and modes of life. It is grace as the joyful acknowledgment of the variety that God loves, the variety he has made. This is quite a different theological understanding from the moral conclusion that simply commands you to obey the commands of God, and one of these is that you deal with your brother as man!

Now I conclude, as those who have been my students know I never can manage but to conclude, with two lines from Gerard Manley Hopkins. The sonnet is called "Spring." The poet cries "And what is all this juice and all this joy?/A stain of earth's sweet being in the beginning in Eden garden."³ Which means that the doctrine of the juice and the joy of this fountain of livingness not only is a grace that waits upon the incarnation in Jesus Christ and then is explicated under a doctrine of redemption, but is also given with the ecological situation: prehuman, human, and in all other relations.

NOTES

1. Charles Norris Cochran, *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1944).

2. Philip Hefner, "The Relocation of the God-Question," *Lutheran Quarterly* 21 (1969):329-41; a revised version appears in *Zygon* 5 (1970):5-17.

3. Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. Mackenzie, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 67.