

consisting of *being* and *living* in the presence of God. The survival of the Jewish people is not just a psychological, emotional or biological fact, it is a *theological reality*. The diaspora cannot be understood politically, it has to be seen as an affirmation of faith, an *élan* towards God. Think of the unforgettable graffito on a bit of wall from a Jewish house entirely destroyed at Cologne:

‘I believe in the sun, even when it does not shine.
I believe in love, even if I do not feel it.
I believe in God, even if he is silent.’

Such was the ideal which animated President Sadat. He hoped to make Mount Sinai a place of prayer and union between the different peoples who inherit the Semitic spirit. His violent death put an end to these spiritual aspirations. In his youth, he had been a revolutionary; at the end of his life he was an apostle of the vision of the three faiths inspired by the Semitic genius and its monotheism. He had had three architects—an Egyptian, a Frenchman and an Israeli—design a tri-confessional complex with three sanctuaries on an equal footing, to be the symbol of the union of which he dreamed .

- 1 The proceedings of the congress were published by the Académie Méditerranéenne as their Cahier II: *L'Humanisme de la Méditerranée*, Monaco 1936.
- 2 Op. cit. p.69.
- 3 Op. cit. pp.36-37.

A Green Theology?

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Before beginning to try to define what kind of Green theology is most likely to have an enduring place, let us try to define what Green theology certainly should *not* be.

The prophets call us to account. The tone of the call is certain, because there must be no risk of our not seeing the difference between our present failure and what they propose. The ecological problems which now occupy some portion of every week's news produce prophecies of doom and demands for action. Our inertia, our denials and the plausible reassurances of governments necessitate both subtlety and strong language, if there is ever going to be a widespread change of attitude. For, to our minds, the villains are always other people.

In this situation the voices loudly resound of self-proclaimed prophets

who declare that they alone have done the proper thing and bowed the knee to Baal. For it is the fertility rites of Baal that now so they say have first claim on us. So, again and again, when the theology of Environmental or Green issues is considered, Christianity is the system of religious belief most severely attacked.

Its reputedly negative attitude towards a fallen world and its anthropocentrism are set off against the virtues of more earthy religion, religion considered to show a greater reverence for the natural order and to be more in line with modern developments such as feminism and a greater valuation of sensuality, developments with which Christianity has had some trouble. All sorts of things held to be undesirable have been connected with the Fall/Redemption philosophy of Western Christianity: certain practices such as asceticism, control of passion, introspection, moderation; certain concerns with sin, guilt and repentance, duty, obedience, a spirituality of power; a culture of the intellect, pessimism, élitism, patriarchy, political conservatism. On the other hand, a Creation-centred approach has in various times and places been said to be connected with desirable ways of thinking such as aestheticism, celebration of passion, a sense of justice, an integrated view of body and spirit, a spirituality of powerlessness, promotion of the imagination, optimism, universalism, respect for women and political criticism.

How realistic is it to imagine that we can go back to Baal and the religions which monotheism displaced? And how desirable?

Primitive religion was, no doubt immensely various, and it is a tendency of the human mind to seek whatever might be helpful to advance views strongly held. But there are surely steps which the human mind has taken which cannot be retraced. It is not, for instance, possible for us to return to those kinds of animism which viewed living (and non-living) forms as inhabited by spirits. No one seriously holds such views who also engages in either philosophy or science. This has nothing to do with anthropocentrism, but is the result of our understanding of how material things behave. If we are to present a moral case for a changed attitude towards living things it must be based upon ideas which we can respectably hold and argue.

For the same reason it is not helpful either to telescope history or to make anachronistic judgments on our forebears. We may be wise after the event or even just before it, but few are able to see very far ahead. Long-past generations who cut down forests to plant crops and killed wild animals to protect themselves experienced both success and failure in these enterprises: nature was endlessly powerful and mysterious. It is not clear that the religious beliefs of those distant forebears always increased reverence for natural things. The gods were to be placated, for they had it in their power to destroy human beings by natural means. On the other hand, there is much in the Old Testament which expresses gratitude for the harvest to the One God.

Furthermore, it would be helpful to know precisely how particular Christian doctrines are held to have led to particular ways of treating the environment. It is said that the dualism of St Augustine has had a baneful

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effect upon the attitude of Christians to the natural world and even upon the development of science. St Augustine and his followers were not dealing with questions of world population, forest clearance or species protection, but were setting out a theological view of human wickedness. Christianity has been very famously blamed for the fall of a civilisation, but even Gibbon did not lay it at the door of one man. In fact, St Gregory Palamas and other Eastern Orthodox theologians set out a different theological view of human wickedness from St Augustine's, but this did not result in their having a radically different attitude towards nature. It is partly a matter of these thinkers not having met the problems which are in the forefront of our own anxieties. Moreover, it seems to be the case that some present-day writers want to make connections between, for instance, ecology and feminism, which would not have occurred to our forefathers in the faith (and which arguably are not necessary to us either).

The relationship between ideas and actions is immensely complex. The fact that even the intended consequences of human actions are as often as not unrealized should tell against too easy a connection between, say, Creation-centred thinking and particular actions. Quite contrary to what Green critics of classical theology would have us expect, although the Old Testament prophets had a very low view of human nature, they expressed a great passion for God's justice. And Karl Barth's hostility to natural theology did not stop him opposing the Nazis; he was, moreover, very musical (being especially fond of Mozart), and his sexuality is part of his theology. This too we are not led to expect. Again: was the period of cathedral-building one in which the creative was foremost in human thinking? Was it not also a time of heresy hunts and other attempts to control human thinking?

Human inconsistency makes the making of patterns very difficult.

II

Having said all this, I would still like to explore whether there is any sense in Green theology as it is often set out, and whether there are any hopes for its reformulation. I write as someone who has long been passionately critical of the destruction of the countryside which we have seen taking place in our life-time, and whose love of trees and the life that they support is said to be 'overdone', but I write also as someone who begins with the conviction that unless we proceed from sound principles both of science and of theology, all our passion and all our self-righteousness will get us nowhere.

Any theological thinking in this matter must do two things: it must give an adequate account of those physical matters with which it deals, and it must allow theology to express its proper concerns.

The major weakness of much current Green theology is that it leans towards pantheism. Insofar as it does so, it seems to me to be mistaken, for it then fails both as a description of the universe and as an adequate account of Christianity. Pantheism says that God is to be found only in the universe,

which, therefore, has an internal unity comparable to that of an organism. But this is not what scientists suppose. On the contrary, all our observations surely indicate not a system but a mass of competing energies interacting in new ways.

It would, then, be a great pity if Green theologians felt that in order to justify themselves they had to bring in the idea of the universe as a process. The world does not seem to be a single process but a mass of different processes which result, in ways we do not understand, in semi-stable states. Each process can be observed behaving according to its nature, for good or ill, the sum of which does not tell any coherent story save by the most partial selection. He is not much of a God whose story has to be told only through this vast incoherence. It is true that we cannot conceive of human life without this vast substructure of galaxies and forms of life but, seen in purely physical terms, it seems like a building which is almost all foundation.

This ought not to trouble a Christian, for it argues for the radical nature of God's creation: that He makes things truly to be themselves and not merely to be physical manifestations of His will. It looks more like a free act than the setting up of an obstacle course to test humanity's worthiness of acceptance (or any other hideous parody of His relationship with us). The resulting universe is a hurly-burly mostly without apparent direction; blind, wasteful; the operation of free energies.

Not all process theologians are pantheists, of course, but I want to suggest that the flaws in process theology are fatal flaws in pantheism and pose questions to certain kinds of panentheism.

The second problem with process theology is that it is hard to reconcile it with the Christian belief in Eternal Life. Only if we can believe in a transcendent God beyond the realm of interacting physicalities can we hold to the promise which is at the heart of the Gospel. The suggestion frequently put forward by process theologians, that God's memory of us in life, in all its incompleteness and anguish, gives a sufficient account of the matter, scarcely does justice to the Christian hope which speaks of new life, not merely of an immortalising of the old.

We can notice here a characteristic of some Green theology which shows itself up in other ways too: the erosion of distinctions (which is sometimes defended as a rejection of dualism). Pantheism erodes the distinction between the material and the transcendent. What we require, as Austin Farrer pointed out, is a theology not of identity but of relation. The reason why God is not needed as a hypothesis for scientific thinking is simply that scientific explanations stand on their own assumptions. This need not diminish the role of the theologian. His or her task is to try to describe the character of that relation.

How are we to imagine God's making and constant remaking of the natural world? Its multifarious character, its most mindless mass of competing systems, is no mere show behind which the divine puppet master is just concealed. He is not, to borrow again from Austin Farrer, like a French speaker who thinks in English; on the contrary, '(t)he shape, the

idiom of the Creator's thought is the very shape and idiom of his creature's existence.' There are no happy endings contrived. The character and behaviour of everything from elephants to earthquakes can be discovered through the operation of regularities of what can be called Natural Law. If God works through them then he must work 'animally' in animals and 'vegetably' in vegetation, and merely 'physically' in physical things like tectonic plates. And the miracle is that, though the behaviour of each, large and small, can be studied purely in terms of its own nature and potentiality, this nevertheless allows the development of relatively stable systems which lead at length to minds which can contemplate the mystery, and to wills that seek to mend by their compassion what pains there are, and so to yet another level of God's creating to that love which is not red in tooth or claw, which does not risk itself only to save its own, but reveals God's nature. Christ's saving death is the very recapitulation of this.

Some have suggested that, as we are to our bodies, so God is to the universe, not inattentive to any particular part but only attending insofar as He is required to do so, paying attention to pains but not unduly to processes functioning properly. The expression 'Soul of the Universe', helpful as it is as a metaphor, in fact overstates our control over our own bodies and understates God's transcendence. But you cannot have everything from a metaphor; you just have to remember that it is one.

If some people want to call the result 'panentheism' that is unobjectionable, in my opinion, so long as those principles are preserved which I have stated above that all theological thinking must fulfil.

III

Panentheism allows for a transcendent God, of course, but finds Him within His creation. Because God somehow indwells all things, all things are deserving of reverence. I have no argument with this providing there is a readiness to make distinctions. My reverence for earthquakes is of a different order from my reverence for their Maker and my love for those injured by them.

Once again, the issue of immortality is instructive. All life is deserving of reverence, but this must square with the distinction which we observe between the degrees of sophistication and sentience of living forms. Process theology, taken neat, offers a poor prospect for those who seek to see their Saviour face to face. It may seem fairer to those animals to which traditional theology has denied the possibility of a heaven to say that no one has that possibility. But suppose we say, instead, that our belief in a transcendent God is itself too narrow unless we allow a place for all God's creatures, what are the implications? Bluntly, is there a heaven for lettuces, oak trees, dogs and dolphins? Heaven, as I have suggested, needs to be distinct from the physicality of change and decay (though—as the first letter of John says—what we shall be has not yet been disclosed). The answer to the question is to ask another: what sense is there in speaking of dogs and dolphins without

reference to bones to chew and oceans to swim in? To put it another way, what is there for God to immortalise? There is no absolute answer. God is not like some clerk in a social benefits office refusing to give to anybody because it is not clear to whom benefits are due. His is a love that is generous beyond measure and who rejoices in what he has made and blesses it continually. Nevertheless, the hard question remains.

In practice, though the eschatological questions, are not about the immortal destiny of trees and birds and dolphins, but about the fact that some immediately and more in the long term, face extinction as living forms. The real debate is conducted about the fate of elephants and red kites as species living in particular habitats. It is also about the fate of human beings, about what will be the effect of global warming on the inhabitants of Bangladesh and the Maldivian Islands. In short, it is about the survival of our planet as the home of living things.

We have no reason to think that the natural order will last forever. Some day the sun will grow too hot or too cold and this earth will cease to be habitable. As Christians we need not suppose that God would wish his harvest of souls to continue endlessly. But to millenarians I would say that it seems inconceivable that God's ending of the age should be brought about by human hubris, by ecological disaster. No doubt His purposes will prevail no matter what evil does, but the devastation of the planet by deliberate or merely short-sighted selfish intent seems like a defeat rather than a triumph of His purposes. To those who would suggest that this could be the last rising of Satan before his downfall, I would say that it never lies in the hands of Christians to side with the destruction of God's creation.

In fact, though, I would prefer to take my stand on less mythological grounds. Eschatology is part of all Christian belief. Our forefathers in the faith saw the end of all things as due to happen in their lifetime. They were wrong in their own terms, but right in others. Because they thought the earth indestructible, the only way an end could come would be by the end of all things. But now we know that endings occur all the time. The last things come for each of us at death when we pass from temporal constraints: in death it makes no sense to speak of waiting until the end of time, for time has ended. Hence, when the sun grows cold it is of little interest to me save that I care for any, whenever they live, whose lives are straitened or their bodies maimed by natural events or human action. What we value now, therefore, is the life of individuals, that each may flourish and, finding life good, may find in its blessings and in human love a parable of God's love so that they may ultimately recognise Christ in glory.

Thus, the stability and openness of human societies, their freedom from want, the dignity of individuals and sense of mutual responsibility, their creativity and dynamism, their sense of wonder: all these things should matter to us for they also are parables of the nature of God.

But, again, the distinction made between God and His creation should be important to us. The stability of the universe is dynamic. There is constant change and decay. It is, to use the traditional word, contingent. This is what

we should have expected: what is created does not last forever. Even without human intervention forests will, as they have in the past, disappear; glaciers have receded and will again; deserts will grow. If what has happened in the past repeats its patterns, though with variations, forests may grow and deserts bloom. Habitats come and go. My heart may sink at the disappearance of a treasured habitats for creatures in whom I take a special interest, but I must beware of that idolatry which gives absolute value to what changes. We are doomed to frustration and despair if we place ultimate value on particular created things instead of on their Creator.

In any case, what we admire and draw strength from is not permanence but fleetingness: sunsets, wooded valleys in the spring, islands in the mist, baby turtles scuttling to the sea. We can return tomorrow or next year and hope to see the same again but no one actually steps into the same river twice. If we live and work amidst natural things we shall see the subtleties of difference: young trees grown old, the silting up of ponds and the growth of thicket and bush; the spreading of populations of birds and the disappearance of others. Nothing remains the same. The idolatry of which I wrote earlier supposes that it does. Spirituality becomes nostalgia. Only God, who renews and makes new things and who allows the fleeting to pass, is not subject to this process. The problem of idolatry is perennial. But even if we can acknowledge the passing character of all created things, we must still find a way of placing a valuation upon what is made, upon which to act. The Green movement is a response to the destruction of what is seen as valuable. It is therefore essential for us to observe what it is in the birds, the fish and the animals that we value.

For many of us the paradigm of animal life is the domestic pet which has become an adjunct of human society. Given a home, a bed, food processed and served at regular intervals, it may even be buried at death, and none of these things by its own kind, but by our attempt to humanise it. But when we value a wolf, an Ethiopian wolf inhabiting the high Sanetti plateau of Central Ethiopia, we are valuing not an individual merely, but an ecosystem. Those who want to preserve gazelles in the Serengeti will not want to preserve them from cheetahs and lions. It makes no sense to do so. A Thompson's gazelle in a zoo is a poor thing by comparison with the same creature in the wild. Its life is diminished; it has become merely dependent on humans. Nevertheless, to thrill to see a herd jumping through the grasslands entails the chase: a cheetah at full stretch for the kill to feed its cubs. Is it right or wrong that my heart lifts each year when I see the little terns bobbing up the creeks in Norfolk seeking for fish to kill?

The implication behind the question is that we value animals and plants as species and as ecosystems, but human beings—in principle if not in horrific practice—as individuals. Is our concern with human individuals (not merely tribes or races) sheer specism? Are human beings different from the rest of nature?

Are human beings different from the rest of nature? Here Green theologians seem to be guilty of inconsistency. They call for a change of attitude, for a new way of thinking about the natural order, something of which animals are not capable. Yet human beings are described from one point of view, as part of nature, and it could be said that therefore there is nothing unnatural in anything they do. It is the power of reason which gives them such dominion, a power which cannot be disclaimed and which now I, as one of them, am attempting to exercise.

I may decide that part of being Green is to become a vegetarian, but I cannot seriously propose this either for the cheetah or the little tern. I, on the other hand, will not deal with chickens as a fox would—nor blame the fox for what he does. Isaiah's proposal that the wolf should dwell with the lamb makes sense as a parable of cooperation, but it is to a divine humanising that it calls us. Like Micah's calling of the mountains to witness, it makes the point that justice is not merely a human arrangement between enlightened human beings; it draws its principles from God's creating power. Thus those outside the Law may nevertheless find it in their consciences. God's creation bears witness to God. Nevertheless, we are not obliged or expected to treat all Biblical pictures as flat descriptions of how things will look. We betray our claim to speak to the imagination if we cannot recognise a metaphor when we see one. We may fairly be asked what we mean by treating animals as human and how realistic this is. How far this makes sense I have tried to say above.

I realise how offensively anthropocentric all of this must be to some people. But it is, in a sense, inevitable. We know ourselves from the inside, everything else at different degrees of remoteness. Not that mere self-interest should be our guide. The mind and the moral sense which Green theologians use to belabour us for our failure to use—these are what set us apart; they are that in us which is in the image of God. We transcend, literally, the environments in which we first flourished; we exercise godlike powers over the planet, godlike powers which, because we are of course only local deities, have been the cause of our problems.

Indeed, what I would say is that our failure has been to exercise these godlike powers wisely enough. The failure of our moral sense in the conduct of wars is so obvious as to need no further comment. The same is true of our permitting of the growth of poverty and starvation. Not quite so obvious is our need to understand the growing impact upon the earth which our 'transcendence' produces. We have acted drastically upon the natural order without knowing what the consequence would be, with a truly naive assumption that 'nature' would be able to cope with whatever we did to it. Wrestling with the logic of causation, we failed to apply it to our rape of the fecund earth. If we did not know what the effect of our activities would be, we should not have behaved as if we did know.

Our lack of imaginative sense, the sense which feeds all spirituality, has

been costly. Many of the changes have happened quickly, but, contrary to the Green thesis, most of our problems derive from old-fashioned sins like greed, pride, jealousy, avarice, anger and covetousness. The Green theologians are correct when they say that many so-called primitive societies had (and have) a greater understanding than ours of the interdependence of human beings and other species. The trouble has been that the technological societies became intoxicated by their greater power and thought that the situation had altered, whereas in principle it had not. Speaking theologically, we have lost the understanding that our transcendence is not original but derived, and that none of the creation really belongs to us.

Undoubtedly we have to change. Unless population size and the impacts of that population on the rest of creation are controlled the effects will be catastrophic. That we do change so slowly is a testimony to the inflexibility of economic systems, our wilful incredulity, and unenlightened self-interest on the part of the powerful. Confronting the need to change is going to make us increasingly aware of our selfishness.

If Green theology is to have an enduring place it will partly be because it has shaken off the dubious mythology attaching to it at present; it will, however, also be because it has shown itself to be more than a branch of ethics. It will be because it says something, always true, but which bears on our condition more acutely than hitherto. It will be because we are genuinely spiritually impoverished if we fail to reverence the natural order, because to do so is to honour its Creator. The argument has been run that those who are cruel to animals have lost something of that which makes us decent to each other. Would that this were true. We have been able to avoid the implications of our conduct towards one species (including our own) by the invention of specious distinctions which allow us to disvalue some group and so treat them appallingly. The trouble is that we have claimed to be the arbiters of value, whereas we have no reason to claim that the Creation is for us, certainly in the narrow sense of being our playground. What is always God's must be revered. This must be a key to its use.

We have a very long way to go in understanding the processes which we see to be everywhere in decay and making the moral decisions for the preservation of our world. It was ever thus. The Christian call for self-giving is ever appropriate as widely unpopular and while I write both wolves and people in Ethiopia are dying from our lack of love.