

Comment

How Green can the Church be?

It is not like meditation and dieting—just one more thing to take up. Fairly soon being Green will not be a trendy thing. What makes individuals Green will touch too much of the lives of too many people for too many generations for Greenness to be trendy. The ecological crisis is forcing mankind to face what is clearly its most urgent moral dilemma. One which creative minds in the Church should be thinking about hard.

But are they? Compared with what has been offered to this journal on social justice and the Bomb, much of the writing submitted to us on the Green issue has been amazingly boring, not saying anything really new. That is why, in the last six years, we have published on average only one text on the subject annually. Now, however, the media, big and small, are being shaken into more action. At the end of this month the BBC and nine other European networks will broadcast a cluster of programmes on Third World poverty and environmental destruction. The *Observer*-sponsored Green Book Fortnight has just been promoting 192 fairly popular books on environmental issues. And an organisation called Christian Ecology Link has been asking this publication and others to take part in a 'green the Church' campaign.

Why—as Edward P. Echlin asked in his July/August 1987 article—is it so hard to green the Church? Here, space being short, we will speak just about the Roman Catholic Church.

A lot of people now know the basic facts: that forests are dying, oceans soon rising, and so on. Not many, though, have thought through their implications. And this applies to Church people as well as others. In his finely-written book *The End of Nature* (Viking, 1990, £12.99) Bill McKibben argues that, thanks to all the extra carbon dioxide we have put into the atmosphere, the world's climate is already at least partly man-made and so even now there is nowhere in the world truly wild nature, untouched by us. Nor will there be again. If, as a species, we begin to behave a little more responsibly, we can stop the damaging acids getting into the rain. We can even give the ozone layer a chance to close up permanently its dangerous holes. Nothing, however, can now save us from the famous 'greenhouse effect' which our fossil fuels have created. The only question is: just how hot is the earth going to get?

That depends, partly, on how we react. We can cling to our anthropocentric view of the world, adapting not ourselves but the earth, using the entire biosphere for our own advantage and so not needing to abandon the style of life to which we have become accustomed. In theory, genetic engineering could help us combat many of the problems created by a much hotter world, a drastically changed climate. But for a high price. To quote McKibben: 'We will live, eventually, in a shopping mall, where every feature is designed for our delectation' (p. 153).

Alternatively, we could shift to a 'biocentric' vision, seeing humanity as just one part of the world. In the words of the Californian poet Robinson Jeffers: 'Integrity is wholeness, the greatest beauty is/organic wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty of the universe. Love that, not man/Apart from that, or else you will share man's pitiful confusions, or drown in despair when his days darken.' Opting for that vision would no doubt increase humanity's long-term chances of survival, but it would involve fairly drastic changes in life-style—and population cuts.

What, if anything, might the Church contribute to this huge debate? The Pope, who is more sensitive to environmental issues than most of his flock, said in his New Year message, *Peace with God the Creator: Peace with All of Creation*: 'the ecological crisis is a moral issue' (see *The Tablet* 6.1.90, p. 30). When we were ignorant of what we were doing that was not strictly true, but from now onwards it is. Our long-term survival depends before anything else on our stopping being greedy and selfish. There may not be many explicitly Green quotes in the Bible, but the pre-Exilic prophets again and again warn those who live unjustly that they will be destroyed. *How*, though are we to make people less greedy, less selfish? We have difficulty changing even ourselves. Remember all those broken Lent resolutions.

Change of this sort obviously depends partly on human beings seeing their neurotic wants for what they are, and partly on them changing their attitude to others and to the place of Man in the world. To the bringing-about of these things religion obviously should be able to make a massive contribution. But much modern Catholicism does not. The anti-environmentalist emphasis in the dominant Judaeo-Christian tradition is still powerful.

There are surprising exceptions, all the same. The draft of the controversial Universal Catechism, which Rome is planning to publish in late 1991, says that one of the things which the Genesis story teaches us about God's wish for his creation is his wish for its solidarity. The equally controversial Matthew Fox, the American Dominican widely known for his creation-centred spirituality (he is touring Britain in early July to talk about it), has talked some terrible nonsense in his time, but a lot of people have benefited from what he has had to say about our interconnectedness with the cosmos, about our social responsibility. The 'fill the earth and subdue it' tradition of Genesis 1:28 may be the strongest in Western religion, but it is not the only one.

What is at stake, however, is not only the capacity of the Church to help change people's moral values, but also the readiness of the Church leadership to support campaigners for Green policies. And here—because of the tensions between different traditions and teaching and policies in the Church itself—the ambiguities multiply.

There are good reasons why the Church should support the Green option, even if it distrusts some of Europe's Green parties. The Pope, for instance, has a healthy distaste for consumerism. Moreover, rejection of the

Green option will mean a heavy dependence on genetic engineering—and everybody in Britain now knows what Catholics think of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill which is currently going through the House of Commons. And in 1986 John Paul II was praising the Maoris for their ‘profound reverence for nature’.

On the other hand, there are issues on which many Catholics will part company with at least some Greens, the more radical ones, the supporters of what is sometimes called ‘deep ecology’, which sees Man as one more species, no more important than any other. Catholics may reject a way of seeing the world which has been so man-centred that it has seen humanity as altogether apart from the rest of creation; all the same, it would be difficult to be a Catholic and not believe that human life has a special value. American feminist Ynestra King accuses the supporters of ‘deep ecology’ of a ‘deep insensitivity to human suffering’. ‘Deep ecology’ can be a disguise for some extremely right-wing attitudes. In many documents the Church has committed itself to Third World development, and some Greens have not allowed for a Third World growing not only in numbers but also in energy-use. (Remember that the average Westerner currently uses 80 times as much energy as the average sub-Saharan African!) In fact, the Green scenario in all its forms includes population control, and I do not need to tell you how the Church feels about talk of that.

Because of these ambiguities, which are sure to discourage vigorous action by the Church leadership, the Church could end up ... doing what? Just helping to run the chaplaincy for McKibben’s ‘shopping mall’—assuming, that is, that anybody in that shopping mall will feel any need for a chaplaincy? An unpromising sign for the future was the refusal of the Catholic Church to participate officially in the convocation at Seoul last March on ‘Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation’. The event had been organised by the World Council of Churches (which had hoped the Catholic Church would agree to co-sponsor it), and was the culmination of the global initiative taken by the WCC in 1983 to explore the relations between justice, peace and the natural world.

The Green issue is riddled with controversy which is going to make it hard for the Catholic Church to be as green as it ought to be. But, precisely because—for better or worse—controversy is going to stop bishops and Vatican officials from taking many initiatives in the debate, Catholics of all sorts should start thinking and talking about it, preferably along with other Christians and non-Christians. Or have you already opted for the shopping mall?

J.O.M.