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THE GOOD EARTH AND THE GOOD BOOK
Sense and Nonsense in the Ecology Issue

a sermon by
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THE GOOD EARTH & THE GOOD BOOK:
Sense and Nonsense in the Ecology ~~Issue~~ ^{Issue}

1.

It goes without saying that the current drive to restore ecological balance to our environment is a good thing that has come none too soon. Surely there are few more worthy and urgent causes of the many that clamor for our limited attention in these tumultuous times. Human nature being what it is, unless some nasty, well-defined, and easily recognizable opposition materializes to hold ^{its} attention and focus its activity, this energetic campaign may yet go the way of all fads. The ecology movement deserves all the support it can get.

Hence this effort to show that the values and norms of a great religious tradition support and encourage a movement which affects the very survival of life on this planet.

Unfortunately, we shall be somewhat deflected by a new pollution problem -- a fall-out of silliness in the theological environment. The New York Times (May 1, 1970) reports an altogether ^{predictable} ~~ex-~~pected theological conference on the subject. Most of the (Protestant) divines at the Claremont symposium were "with it," from the crisp title ("Theology of Survival" -- in an age when Portnoy's Complaint is elevated into a "Theology," why not?) to the conventional self-flagellation. After all, having written the obituary for the Deity and debunked His best-seller, what is so terrible about theologians asserting that religion is responsible for our dirty planet, and that the solution requires another one of those "major modifications" of current religious values? Yet, some of the confessions were so extravagant that they deserve at least passing comment, particularly when they affect aspects of the

Biblical tradition presumably shared by both Judaism and Christianity.

The case for the ecological movement is obvious and beyond dispute. One point, of the many cogent ones made in the growing literature on the subject, is worth repeating here. René Dubos has reminded us that we still know precious little about pollution. Seventy percent of all the precipitate contaminants in urban air are still unidentified and twenty to thirty years hence those who are today below the age of three will undoubtedly show varying signs of chronic and permanent malfunction. Man is clever enough to conquer nature -- and stupid enough to wreck it and thereby destroy himself.

The starting point for a religious consideration of man's relations with his natural environment is the divine blessing to man in Genesis 1:28 -- "be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air and over every creeping thing that creepeth on the earth." For years the Bible had been identified as the major impediment to the progress of science. Now that science and technology are ecological villains, the blame for them is placed -- on the Bible. "And subdue it" has now been proclaimed by theologians at the Claremont symposium as the source of man's insensitivity and brutality. "Dominion .. over the fowl of the air" has been equated to the right to foul the air. What hath moral masochism wrought?!

restraints and
^ The Bible's respect for non-human nature is evident in the restrictions that follow immediately upon the "subdue" commandment: man

is permitted only to eat herbs and greens, not to abuse the resources of nature. Meat-eating was likewise prohibited until the generation of Noah, the first carnivores. Man's commanding role in the world brings with it responsibility for the natural order. *He may rule over nature, not ruin it.* Adam is punished for his sin by the diminution of nature's potencies, surely a bad thing. Cain is cursed to become a wanderer to whom the earth will refuse its bounty; again, the alienation of man from nature is considered an evil, a punishment. The destruction wrought by the flood is an evil laid at the feet of man. And in the eschatological vision of Isaiah, the restoration of man to harmony in and with nature is the prophet's most powerful metaphor for the felicity of the Messianic redemption. The talmudic tradition continues this implicit assumption of man's obligation to and responsibility for nature's integrity: Nothing that the Lord created in the world was superfluous or in vain; hence all must be sustained. God created the world by looking into the Torah as an architect into a blueprint. Creation, the Rabbis were saying, is contingent upon the Torah, or, the survival of the world depends upon human acceptance of moral responsibility.

In an article in Science (cited by the Times), a history professor avers that the verse in Genesis coupled with the Judeo-Christian rejection of pagan beliefs in the divinity of nature has made possible Western man's exploitation of nature "in a mood of indifference to the feelings (sic) of natural objects." But is it not extravagant to call for a return to paganism as a way of correcting a misinterpretation

of the Biblical view of man in relation to his environment? Can now of milder cure be found for faulty exegesis? *Nature is certainly desecrated, and*
Man, in the Jewish interpretation of the Bible, is certainly considered a co-creator with God. In a remarkable parable, R. Akiva explained to a Roman pagan general that man's deeds are more beautiful (or useful) than God's. Holding some stalks of grain in one hand and a loaf of bread in the other, he showed that the products of technology are more suited for man than the results of natural process alone. Technology here receives religious sanction. But the Talmud also maintains that man was last to be created so as to counter the arguments of the heretics that God did not create the world alone but did so with the assistance of a "partner." The two themes are consistent with each other. The original creation, and hence title to the world, is that of God; but the creation was left incomplete and man was bidden to finish the job by exercising his technological genius. Man may thus participate in the taming of Nature, but he remains responsible to its Creator for its welfare. He may use but not abuse it, *exploit it but not exploit it*

Man's creative talents, in imitation of his Creator, are implied in the Bible's doctrine that man possesses the image of God, a concept which teaches as well man's discontinuity with and qualitative superiority to the rest of the natural order. But this cannot be construed as a warrant for man's right to despoil the world. First, while he is beyond the natural order, he also participates in it; he is an intersection of the natural and the divine. Man remains a creature, and the denial of his creatureliness turns his creative powers to satanic

ends. The plurals in the verse "And God said, Let us make man in our image" (Gen. 1:23) is explained by R. Joseph Kimhi as including both God and nature, or earth, to whom the words are addressed. Man remains inextricably tied to nature even while he is urged to transcend it. Second, man is considered as responsible to God for nature and its bounty. He does not hold ultimate title to the universe. Before benefiting from it he must acknowledge God as King of the World. The world is man's to enjoy, not to ruin. Judaism holds that man is obligated, both morally and juridically, to respect the integrity of nature. So reverent were the Rabbis of "the orders of nature," that, although they accepted miracles as a self-evident aspect of divine power, they looked with disdain upon one to whom a miracle occurred; the disruption of the natural process in order to save him was considered a necessary evil -- but evil it was.

Respect for the inviolability of nature, as expressed in the confirmation of the separateness and non-interchangeability of its various parts, may be said to lie at the heart of one of the less rationally appreciated Pentateuchal commandments -- that prohibiting the mixing of different seeds in a field, of diverse animals in common harness, ^{or in interbreeding,} and of wool and linen in the same garment. Here the Bible demands a symbolic affirmation of nature's original order in defiance of man's manipulative interference. Interestingly, this law is preceded immediately by the famous commandment (Lev. 19:18) "thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Reverence for the integrity of a fellow man's autonomy leads to respect for the integrity of nature's autonomy.

Jewish law further embodies this principle, so basic to a value context for the ecological movement, in a number of ways. The Sabbath was never understood by the Halakhah as merely a matter of physical refreshment and rest. It pointed primarily to the relationships between man, world, and God. By ordering man to cease his creative interference in the natural world (the Halakhah's definition of "work"), it taught man respect for nature as God's possession and not as an unconditional gift to man. *The same principle underlies the "Sabbath of the earth" as the Bible terms the sabbatical & Jubile years.* The Mishnah interpreted the Psalmist's "a song for the Sabbath day" (Ps. 92) as "a song for the hereafter, for the day which be all Sabbath." Thus, for the Rabbis the weekly renunciation of man's role as interloper and manipulator and his symbolic gesture of regard for nature was extended into a perpetual Sabbath; hence, a new insight into Jewish eschatology: not a progressively growing technology and rising GNP, but a peaceful and mutually respectful coexistence between man and his environment.

Another example of the halakhic respect for mute nature is its prohibition of any wanton destruction. The Bible (Dt. 20:19,20) forbids the wasteful destruction of a fruit tree in a time of siege. The Halakhah extends this prohibition to cover all times, whether of war or of peace. But what of the senseless waste of other natural objects, not fruit trees? Most authorities (Tosafot and Sefer Yereim) hold that the "fruit tree" is but a single instance of any kind of purposeless destruction, all of which is equally forbidden by biblical law and punishable by flogging. Maimonides (who earlier had held to the same opinion, but

then changed his mind) decided that only destruction of the fruit tree is punishable according to biblical law. What of other objects? Some commentators believe that Maimonides includes them as rabbinical prohibitions. But one important commentator holds that Maimonides prescribes flogging for the fruit tree, but all other objects, while not punishable, are equally prohibited by biblical law. Thus, the Halakhah clearly enjoins any brutal, wanton, senseless offense against nature -- and even against human produce. It demands of us a sense of responsibility before all creativity, and a special sense of reverence before God's work.

Other illustrations may be found to prove the point. Such halakhic constructs as the banning of any public danger or causing danger to individual and certainly to collective life, are sufficient evidence of the importance of the issue to the Jewish tradition. But there is no need to belabor the point. It is abundantly clear that not only can the Jewish tradition, which underlies so much of Western religious thinking, not be accused of tolerating the mindless ~~exploitation~~ ^{destruction} of the environment, but it provides a full theological rationale for getting on with the drive to restore cleanliness and purity to our air and water.

It is all the more pathetic, therefore, even irresponsible, of some theologians to suggest the rejection of the Jewish principle of the sacredness of human life as a means for undergirding ecological values. To deny human values in order to enhance nature is self-defeating; our complaint, after all, is that we are ourselves going to be the victims of our senseless ~~brutality~~ ^{vandalism} towards nature. To revert, in this

twentieth century, to a conceptual equivalent of the child-sacrifice to the ancient nature-gods is a piece of atavistic nonsense.

The Sages of the Mishnah taught that the world was created by ten utterances. Why ten when one would have sufficed? Because, they answered, God will exact severe penalty from the wicked who destroy such a complex world, and bestow rich reward upon the righteous who sustain it. The sacredness of human life, and the sense of moral responsibility that goes with it, does not contradict but reinforces the value of nature as a divine creation.

Committed Jews are, by virtue of their commitment, compelled to join in this common humane effort to safeguard the wholeness of nature and the habitability of the planet.

Now is the Time for All Good Men to Come to the Aid of the Good Earth and, if they have time to spare, to Save the Good Book from its Official Guardians.