



Joshua Lederberg

Ecology Has All Requisites Of an Authentic Religion

"CHRISTIANITY is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen," according to UCLA historian Lynn White Jr. in a landmark paper that appeared in *Science* magazine three years ago. Before condemning "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis" as Communist propaganda, one should also read that Prof. White classified Marxism, like Islam, as "a Judeo-Christian heresy."

The central principle of his analysis concerns the relationship of man to nature. Is it "God's will that man exploit nature for the proper ends," as we are taught by the Bible, the U.S. Constitution and the dialectical materialists alike? Or does our scientific knowledge of man as a stage in the evolutionary process lead us to a new appreciation of man's place not over, but in nature?

THE "ECOLOGY" movement has been derided as having the flavor of a religious revival, besides having misappropriated the name of a science that is still looking for the tools it needs to make effective generalizations. What we should understand in that it has all the requisites of an authentic religion, including a multiplicity of prophets.

We live today in a vacuum of faith, and there are many more dangerous ways (remember Nazism) by which it might be filled. The love of earth can be at once the most primitive and the most sophisticated of religions, and it deserves the same respect as the other credos by which men shape their lives. As with other re-

ligions, its slogans may also require creative reinterpretation before they are either criticized or routinely applied to daily life.

In the time of St. Francis of Assisi, this theology responded primarily to spiritual needs; today, it is reinforced by the most materialistic of concerns—how man can survive to enjoy the abundance of his creations.

At the very least, the image of nature is deeply rooted in every man's axioms of beauty. When we speak of the esthetic values of the environment, we use atreacherous expression; esthetics covers too much, and is likely to confuse us with controversies about the merits of one as against another style of painting or architecture.

It is simple observation, however, that no one we deem sane is likely to deny the beauty of the unspoiled landscape. We may quarrel about the beauty or ugliness of a building, a utility pole or a city; we differ only in the degree of our commitment about the esthetic value of the forests and the shorelines.

IT IS STILL possible, nevertheless, for a public utility to invade a public park for a right-of-way for a transmission line and insist that this does no damage; it is merely a visual blemish. This was the position taken by the Pacific Gas and Electric Co. in opposition of a proposed line into Briones Park, Calif., one of Oakland's badly needed breathing spaces.

The company was supported by a 4-to-1 vote of the state Public Utilities Commission in a reaffirmation of

a long tradition which, as held by a New Jersey court, regards "esthetic considerations as a matter of luxury and indulgence rather than of necessity."

This point of view is not only venal; it is an objectively false description of human values and behavior. Is it a luxury for the plastic surgeon to repair the scars on a burned woman's face if neither she nor others could bear the sight? What do we know altogether about the world we inhabit except through our senses, and especially our vision?

Up to a point, we can tolerate ugliness, mainly by avoiding it. But the present legal system is encouraging the spread of pockmarks on the landscape to the point where we are already troubled to find a sufficiency of the natural scenes that are the common denominator of the human understanding of beauty.

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