

Theology of Nature – Two Lutherans' Viewpoints

Colleagues,

After a semester's leave-of-absence from ThTh postings my partner Robin Morgan is back. ThTh #134 is her theology-of-the-cross essay on one of today's hot topics: Eco-theology. These reflections arise from Robin's work this past semester in her PhD program at St. Louis University. As usual: comments welcomed.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Some Thoughts on Ecotheology

In a recent issue of the Christian Century (Dec. 13, 2000), H. Paul Santmire, an ELCA clergyman and long time ecojustice theologian, has the cover article "In God's Ecology: a Theology of Nature." Santmire's first book on ecojustice, "Brother Earth", came out in 1970 and he has been writing continuously about these critical issues of our time ever since (his book "The Travail of Nature" looks at the theme of creation in Christian theologians across the centuries and is still the standard text on the topic). This article comes in part from his most recent book, "Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology" (Augsburg, 2000). Here I'll summarize his article and then offer some reflections for further thought.

SANTMIRE

Santmire begins by quoting Al Gore, who asked in his book,

“Earth in Balance”, “Why does it feel faintly heretical to a Christian to suppose that God is in us as human beings? Why do our children believe that the kingdom of God is up, somewhere in the ethereal reaches of space, far removed from this planet?” Santmire says that Gore expresses here the yearning of many Christians for resources in the faith that will equip them for engaging environmental issues. So Santmire’s theological task is laid out.

He states that much of the Christian ecojustice writing of the last generation has evolved into two basic camps – the reconstructionists and the apologists. The reconstructionists believe that there are few resources within the historical Christian tradition with which to engage environmental issues and so a “new edifice of thought must be designed from the ground up, with new foundations and new categories.” Matthew Fox, Thomas Berry, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Sallie McFague all fall into this category, according to Santmire.

The apologists, on the other hand, emphasize “the Christian faith’s positive ecological implications.” Good stewardship of the earth with all its God/human focus and ethical overtones is the center of the apologists’ work. “Their primary concern is for wise management of the resources of the earth for the sake of the people of the earth, especially ‘ecojustice’ for the poor.” Santmire cites Thomas Derr and Douglas John Hall along with the World Council of Churches in this camp.

Even though these two options are the main thrusts of Christian environmental theology today, Santmire says that there is a third option called revisionist. Initially springing from Joe Sittler’s address [“The Cosmic Christ”] to the World Council of Churches in New Delhi in 1961, this position stays within the classical Christian tradition defined by the ecumenical councils, but claims that a “Christ centered theology can

address not only the redemption of humanity, but also the history of creation.” He includes James Nash, Terence Fretheim and Jurgen Moltmann here.

Santmire says that this revisionist position is biblical, christological, ecological and ecclesiological. Its christocentrism “will take on a more universal scope than it did in the works of the reformers and Barth, and will highlight, as Sittler did, the cosmic creational and salvific purposes of God with all things.”

According to Santmire, the revisionists see that “what the theology of justification by faith meant for a church in need of reformation in the early sixteenth century is precisely what the theology of nature must mean for a church in need of reformation in the twenty first century.”

He goes on to propose nine areas for theological conversation, which expand the traditional God/human parameters of Protestant Christianity to include the rest of creation. Santmire concludes that conversation which takes into account these three principals, rather than the God/human focus we have held, will reshape the way we do theology and live as church in this time of global environmental crisis.

MORGAN

I believe that before such triangular theological thinking can bear fruit, we need to delve more deeply into the God/human paradigm, which most ecojustice thinkers along with Santmire have criticized to one degree or another. In my opinion, there is still a strong current of dominating Christendom thinking here. Upon realizing that we’ve sinned, made a mess of much of the planet, we stand up and say, “By God, we will fix what we’ve broken and nobody better get in our way while we do it.”

One aspect of Christology that I believe has been neglected by the reconstructionists, apologists and revisionists is Christ as the Dependent One. [My exploration of Christ as the Dependent One is inspired by Robert W. Bertram's article, "Christ(ening)" in *Currents in Theology and Mission* June 1991, 196-197]. Jesus Christ as the second person of the Trinity is the Son of God and as the Son is dependent on the Father. Not in a way that denies their co-equality as persons in the Trinity, but as "the One who depends" as Gregory of Nyssa says.

This dependence is something that none of us wants to think much about because it's not particularly "godlike" in our normal pattern of thinking. "To depend" in our society is a much maligned position to be in, and with good reason. Being dependent tends to leave one vulnerable and make one look weak. Not being in charge certainly can't be the way to go into such a critical situation as the ecojustice crisis of our time.

Yet he came as one of us. The Cosmic Christ is also the baby on Mary's lap, the man without a home, the bloodied stranger hanging on the tree. Maybe this is the way God allows us to fulfill that most primal human desire, to be like God. You want to be like Me? Here's the way. Appear weak, be vulnerable, depend on Me. This is how humans can be most godlike.

Maybe today, to address these ecological and justice issues, this is the godlike state we need to embrace. We're not talking about launching out for new lands to missionize and conquer. We're not talking about building empires or new Christian cultures. We're talking about turning around and cleaning up messes, our messes, many of which have been made in Jesus' name.

This is a different way of thinking about being church and it doesn't seem possible that we can even imagine doing such work without knowing and experiencing, as Santmire says, that God has

dealt with radical evil through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Walking back into our own sin and cleaning up the mess, which is what ecojustice theologians are demanding, can't be done without God through Christ providing the way.

On our own, human beings are not sufficiently selfless to walk back into a home-grown crisis without shifting blame and demonizing something or someone else in the process. It is the radical forgiveness that comes to us freely through Christ which allows us to be honest enough to accept our part in the sin, and still be able to stay involved and begin rebuilding in new and just ways.

How can we live an interdependent life of mutual support with the rest of the cosmos using the tools of hierarchical western culture to do the job? How can we be interdependent until we know how to depend?

The Dependent One isn't very attractive to us. Being small and vulnerable isn't what we're looking for – we can provide enough small and vulnerable of our own. But maybe it is this reality of our God, the Child-ness of our Lord that will help the church see where it needs to be in relation to the creation, in relation to each other and in relation to our Creator.

Radical depending implies a kind of trust on the part of the depender and trustworthiness on the part of the one depended on. That, again, tends to be outside the normal purview of human beings. Even stoked with all the optimism of the goodness and beauty of creation and our part in it, we are reluctant to let go of the comfort and power of western culture. Life in partnership with "the other," whether people not like us or mountains or cockroaches, is profoundly counterintuitive.

What would such a partnership look like? Being interdependent doesn't include coming in and taking charge of cleaning up the

mess we've made, the way we think it ought to be cleaned up. It's being willing to sit in the mess, listen and learn from those who've been messed up and together, step-by-step (sometimes backwards, sometimes forward, sometimes not moving at all) build a new way of being together.

There could be no war on poverty, war on drugs or war on whalers in such a partnership. These kinds of first strike, frontal assault tactics are the antithesis of interdependent, mutual support living. All of creation functioning together for the benefit of all is not possible by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. We are not in charge. We are part of the cosmic history of our God who made us in God's own image and linked us together with the rest of creation to behold God's glory and praise God's name. Our first love, the Dependent One with the scars in his hands, his feet and his side, is our savior and model for interdependent living.

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