

## CULT AND CULTURE IN AND AFTER EDEN: ON GENERATING ALTERNATIVE PARADIGMS

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The title originally assigned to me, and at the same time to two other speakers, was "Christian Environmental Values". As I go about drafting, a month before the Madison meeting, in the shadow of the greater competence of the other two people assigned the same general theme, I need to specify which of the several dimensions of this broad field I expect to attend to.

One level of "environmental values" is that of the overarching world view held by a person or a community, in the light of which particular values and their priorities are situated and defined. A recent flood of writing, within which the work of Professor McFague stands out, has been devoted to revision of Christian thought on this level. I can hardly, at this point near the end of the conference, propose to contribute anything new here.

Another level of study seeks to improve the adequacy with which we formulate public game rules for keeping the world viable. We work, as the landmark conference at Rio a few weeks ago did, toward a stronger definition of "sustainability", and for better ways to make transparent and accountable the relations between "south" and "north." We study whether deforestation, ozone depletion, CO2 accumulation or the HIV virus is a greater threat to the common good. We ask how world market mechanisms might be more justly structured. This is within the theme of Prof. Rasmussen's expertise.

What seems to remain for me to offer is a loosely linked handful of smaller topics. They might be called fragments of "wisdom." They have to do with how to go on living when all the big questions are insoluble. The themes I propose to attend to are "Christian" in the setting where I see them, although I can see nothing that would keep them from being shared by Jews or by original Americans. They are "ecclesial" in the sense being dealt with by Prof. Rasmussen, namely in that they take account of a value-bearing community which is neither the same as, nor in control of, the world as a whole, but they are not ecclesiastical. I can approach them most easily by formulating them negatively.

### 1) Why Kant can't.

It may be that no axiom is more deeply rooted in our cultural reflexes than the one which Immanuel Kant stated abstractly. We call it "generalizability". It says that I should make my decisions while asking whether the maxim that guides me should guide everyone. I should consider myself the prototypical actor in the human drama. I am in everyone's shoes. For example; If I cannot promise a world without war, I should be ready to kill. Any discipline I can't ask of everyone can hardly be binding for me. Any mode of action is to be tested by asking "what if everyone did it?"

This assumption is natural in a culture where it is true (or thought to be true) that all share the same values and are bound by the same fate. Since "Constantine" created "Christendom", that "truth" has been the official self-understanding of our culture's elites. Neither Reformation nor Enlightenment changed that deep reflex. Yet that is the axiom I am saying we must challenge.

It would have been unthinkable for Jews since Jeremiah, or for Christians before Constantine, to think that way. They were quite consciously and without apology a value-bearing minority. They could never have imagined themselves as the prototypical moral actor for all of the empire. Their ethical question was "by what axioms should we be guided when we know full well that the rest of the world will not respect them?" The Jews called this independent value system Torah and the Christians called theirs "Good News"; the two were not as different in either substance or style as the heirs of both have been pretending since Constantine. What they had in common was that one did not learn to know the will of God by laying over current issues the grid of generalizability.

The subculture which in our time, also in Wisconsin, best exemplifies the effectiveness of not taking one's signals from "What if everybody did it?" is the agriculture of my Amish cousins. While other family farms are being bankrupted by the rising costs of monster tractors, synthetic fertilizers, fossil fuels and bank financing, the Amish are founding new colonies and restoring depleted land, doubling their population and their acreage every generation. Their demonstrating over the last century how low-tech sustainable cultivation can compete in a market economy would never have been undertaken if a priori generalizability had been their first criterion. Their first "maxim" was the conviction that the will of God for human flourishing is known and carried by a specific living community, unashamed to be different from "the world." The functional measure of God's sovereignty is the community's readiness to suffer the world's scorn for the sake of obedience. The content of that "obedience" is not an abstract foundational imperative, nor a specified Biblical text, but a corporate life style.

The second maxim underlying Amish sustainability is one - to the historian's embarrassment it must be confessed - whose conceptual origins cannot be documented from the records. From the polders of Friesland to the Vistula basin, from the mountaintops of the Bernese Jura to the plain of Alsace, to the Palatinate depopulated by the 30 years' war, the heirs of the movement which the official reformations called "Anabaptist" had by the end of the seventeenth century (the time when the Amish sub-movement began) become, in the minds of others as much as in their own, the bearers of a special mystique of identification with the land. Not much later this mystical reputation led to their being especially welcomed as immigrants in Pennsylvania and in the Ukraine, as in our century in Paraguay. Non-Mennonite publishers sold farmers' almanacs by putting an "anabaptist" on the cover or on the masthead.

This phenomenon of mystical identification with the land has no immediately evident connection with the theological and ethical distinctives which had created the Anabaptist movement in the sixteenth century; with pacifism, refusal of the oath, believers' baptism, anticlericalism, or the independence of the church from the state. Nor do we find its grounds articulated in the hymns and prayer books of the later generations.

There would be explanatory hypotheses of a legal nature for this fact. In most of Europe "anabaptists" could not at first be citizens or own land; this gave them a special stake in being exemplary tenants. Their capital had to be movable; namely their livestock and their skill in farming. But this kind of explanation should have applied no less in some territories to Calvinist or Lutheran (or in some Alsatian villages to Jewish) tenant farmers. Some further explanation is needed; no articulated theology states it, but the fact is there.

Michael and James Himes, in a recent article in Commonweal, project the notion that Christians might relate to the non-human creation as "thou" rather than as "it." They give no examples of what that would mean for raising maize or breeding cattle, for responding either to the Amazon or to the HIV virus. Can one say "thou" to a water table or an avalanche? The metaphor does not yet seem quite right to render the mystique of knowing and loving the land and the livestock as it were from inside, suffering the drought and the plague with them. Yet it comes close.

I think I can say this much; - though without any root in the texts. The Biblical model of a happy relation to nature is for the Anabaptist and Amish farmer the garden of Genesis 2, with human caretakers keeping order as each species of plant and beast does its thing after its kind. Nature is not jungle, thicket, or desert. The thorns and thistles of Genesis 3:17-19 do not have the last word in the homesteader's way. The earthquakes, droughts and grasshoppers which the prophets predict as signs of divine visitation are the exception, not the rule.

The Amish Mennonite sub-community's capacity sustainably to reclaim and serve the land, without irreversibly depleting the aquifers or sending the topsoil down river, is guided by that positive vision of the garden as well as by the previously-noted (negative) "maxim" of disregarding generalizability.

There may well be something conflictual at stake, for our conference agenda, in the fact that the garden is a more congenial vision than the wilderness. The "Sierra Club" kind of "nature" that one can only walk through carefully, and not inhabit, is a less congenial vision in this connection than that of Eden.

## 2) What went wrong

Now that I have worked by way back to Genesis, I should lift out of that ancient prototypical legend another set of observations, without apology for beginning with the classics. That story rehearses for us an holistic vision of the human predicament, stated in economic and political terms from the outset. It is not that economic and political implications or deductions are drawn, by an intellectual operation, from a general statement about "culture" on some other level, whether "religious" or intellectual. There is no bridge needed from "nature" to "history" or vice versa. Adam, humankind, is formed from the earth, adamah, and is at home there. The vegetation is food for man and woman, but it is also their job. The divine creative initiative is extended by Adam's being assigned to name and order the animals. Rationality, language, the ordering process which makes sense out of sense data, is not something already done for humans ahead of time in the timeless logic of God as a platonic super spirit, or prehistorically decided in the eternal divine councils as the Trinity discussed in miltonian rhythms what to do with a cosmos

already gone wrong. It is the human, in the local specificity of history beginning, who by naming the neighbors begins to discharge the role delegated to her and to him of ordering the garden.

This is not - to take the text as it stands - the kind of alien or violent "dominion" over nature which later visions of human power were to make of it. The garden was entrusted to us as a fundamentally hospitable context for us to serve God and one another. The fruits of the plants are fitting food, the animals are friendly neighbors (not to be eaten, in the vision of Eden); we are capable of ordering this cosmos, and its good is the same as our own.

The second strand of the ancient legend is expressed in the same idiom; one fruit, one tree, is not for us to dispose of. We are not absolute; the garden's subjection to our viceregal management is not unconditional. The order we administer is not for us to change. What is wrong with seizing the fruit of the forbidden tree is not simply that it formally disobeys an arbitrary and irrational rule. Seizing the fruit is the claim to sovereignty; "you shall be Godlike" the serpent had said. This may be the point in the ancient cosmology where the metaphor will be most translatable to our times. In that we are not godlike, because we are not godlike, we must discover and yield to the laws of limits and balance that govern life; we are not free to remove vegetation or to add freon as we wish. We cannot graze goats across North Africa, or plow the prairies, or dam the Nile, or log the rainforests, without untoward surprises. To think that we control the system (arbitrarily) will mean seeing its (relative) control slip from our grasp. What was a fertile garden with whose natural potential we could co-operate becomes a desert peopled by weeds and thistles, demanding burdensome labor before yielding any fruit. Death is the final verdict condemning the effort to break free of the divinely intended harmony. Dust returns to dust; our final link with the soil is that having refused to harmonize with it when alive, we are reabsorbed by it when dead.

But the ancient story has another strand, one of which our religious traditions have made much. After being thrown out of the garden and into mortality, humankind receives a renewed promise of survival. Man's work in the field will yield food although at the cost of sweat. To woman is given the promise of posterity although at the cost of pain. Life will continue under the conditions of history, or fallenness, but that it goes on under that judgment is still a divine promise.

After that promise there is a second curse, again described in terms of ecology. Even more pointedly in the Abel/Cain story than in the garden/desert account, we see the traces of the ancient culture clash between two phases of prehistory. Cain had been going on doing what his father was condemned to do, namely tilling the soil, and offering some of its fruits in sacrifice. Therein his story prolongs organically that of chapter 3. Abel on the other hand is a throwback, for whose profession of herdsman the earlier narration provided no etiology. The shepherd who does not break open the soil, who shrewdly and submissively adapts his flock's movements to the vegetation that mother earth has already provided, is somehow "closer to nature" or "less fallen", less estranged from the original edenic covenant, than the farmer. Cain was unwilling to recognize the priority of his brother's life style. Yet the narrative makes no effort to make the killing understandable; it is not retaliation or vengeance. It has no reason.

Thereby the prototypical fratricide coincides with the prototypical and perennial clash at the threshold of human history between the herdsmen and the farmers. Cain can no longer stay on the farm because the soil which has drunk his brother's blood accuses him. The Cain story then goes on to create within less than ten verses all the basic components of fallen history:

- the protective threat of vengeance (which some of us call "the state");
- the city (what in Latin we call "civilisation");
- what we call the arts (Jubal's music);
- what we call technology (Tubal-Cain's metallurgy);
- and Lamech's escalating vengeance (which we call war).

All of what it takes to have moved from the bedouin life to high mesopotamian culture unfolds in Genesis 4 from that first murder.

Yet even this unfolding of prehistory is still under the sign of grace. Cain and his sons were able to create civilization "away from the presence of YHWH/Adonai" because they had been placed, by the same God who banned them, under the protection of the threat of vengeance - the same threat which Cain's descendent Lamech was to escalate into the sevenfold vendetta.

To restate in our language what the ancient story assumed: Adam makes the transition from nature to culture; Cain from culture to war. Culture (whose root meaning, we remember, was agriculture), is already morally ambivalent. It is close to nature, but not natural. It scratches open the soil in order to wrest sustenance from it. It is not thereby sinful, but it is part of the price of sin. It becomes the occasion for fresh sin and the multiplier of its damages.

The sin of Cain - and therefore my sin, for we all live ultimately from breaking open the soil - was not that he tilled and harvested. It began when he refused to recognize that his brother Abel was closer to the beginnings and closer to the God of the natural than he was. But he deepened that offense and estrangement, and made it irrevocable, when he chose not to share in Abel's sacrifice of a sheep from the flock; instead, in a macabre parody of the killing of an innocent sheep, he sacrificed his innocent brother. That bloodshed made his even his fields hostile to him.

Does the ancient legend in any way fit together not only with the roots of ancient near eastern civilization, but with the mess we are in? I might suggest that there are technological optimists among us who still trust in our capacity to discharge the original mandate to makes sense of the cosmos by naming our fellow creatures and managing our garden. This vision, when taken alone, tends to fuse organic evolution, historical progress, biblical hope language, hegelian hope language, and technology in one seamless myth of development which only a few years ago seemed to be the other name for "peace" or for "freedom."

Secondly, there are the religious fatalists who see the core of the problem in the original rebellion and the punishment visited upon promethean pride. We are condemned to survive by

sweating it out until we die. The best Grace concedes to us is to see this struggle as a holding operation. James Watts represented it well; we may as well sell off what is left of nature, since if we don't burn it up the second coming will. The New Earth God has promised stands in no continuity to the one we are currently wasting.

Thirdly, there would be the prophetic critics for whom Cain's sin has more explanatory power than Adam's. Cain could have and should have admitted that his sacrifice was ambivalent; that his use of the earth was more violative than Abel's. The fundamental sin is not pride alone as the Augustinians would have it, though that was what opened the door. The worse offense was the breach of fraternity with the simpler shepherd brother whose living from the land, like his sacrifice, was more natural. That breach resulted from the refusal to recognize that our toil in the fields, even when blessed with fruit, was already morally ambivalent, already blemished by the expulsion from Eden.

Yet even that wounded pride, and the tension between the brothers which it produced, would not have been our downfall. Our downfall was that the pride became murder. From the levels of culture and cult we escalated the scandal to the denial of community, deceiving and destroying the brother, because he was Other. (More recently we have been challenged to work at the offense of the Other when the difference is race, gender, or class. It may be important that the first Other was the brother; i.e. an hostility not defined by any outward difference.

To conclude; I have been looking in the Genesis legend for the presence of the agenda of culture and nature. It is there. The pattern of shift from gathering to shepherding to gardening, and from there to building cities and then empires, will be run through again and again as we seek to respond to the challenges we are studying here.

Yet the reason we have the story before us, the reason this ancient literature exists, is that those who recited it for generations and then wrote it out saw these prototypical events as having occurred in the providential context of divine ordering. Divine enabling is present not only in providing the first Eden, as seems to be taken for granted by many of those for whom "nature" and "creation" are equated. The intent of the expulsion from the garden (instead of death) is protective; the new beginning under changed conditions and a renewed promise is again Grace. The mark which saved Cain from being the victim of vigilantes is again Grace, even though the vindictive reflex which that mark symbolized opened the door for escalation into the paroxysm of Lamech's boasted sevenfold vengeance, with which the after-Eden story breaks off.

Reviewing the lay of the land as thus classically portrayed, my response by way of suggested directions for hope can only be a handful of fragments picked up in midstream.

3) Does "History" have to be Empire?

As far as I as a relative amateur can see it, the most poignant polar debate in our arena is one which is well stated by George Tinker, a seminary teacher of Apache and Cherokee blood, in the last issue of The Ecumenical Review. (Tinker 1992 p. 81.) In a Christian context this text sharpens the formulation of a perennial polarity. It is most easily formulated, for our time, in the

light of the Columbus backlash, although I remember the same point's being made in 1980 by the Cinghalese theologian Tissa Balasuriya.

What the barbarian invasions from Renaissance Europe, overrunning both Asia and the Americas, meant, both in the old Indies and the New, one can say, was the intrusion of a time-oriented vision of God's rule as purposive, directional, history-making, into a world without that vision of directional history. Tinker rightly observes that the western theologies of liberation (he cites G. Gutierrez, but he could have reached back to the puritans) partake no less of this linear intrusiveness than do the imperial establishment ideologies; both use "God who acts" language.

This time-oriented vision, Tinker suggests, invaded a space-oriented, inclusive vision of human dignity in the world within a divine presence. That vision is "just as adequate, and perhaps more satisfying and certainly more egalitarian than the West's." The pre-columbian vision was overrun by the European one not because the immigrant culture, structured as nation-states, was more humane or more moral, but because of its superior firepower, and because of the short-range tactical advantage that can always be seized by not fighting fairly. The immigrants refused to apply to the original inhabitants the theory of human dignity to which our nation's founding documents appealed.

(I here capsule the contrast between "all men are created equal" and the American practice of "ethnic cleansing" (to use the new Serbian label for it) in the terms most applicable to the nineteenth century in the USA, when most of the destruction was done. This is not to overlook the fact that the process of cultural genocide was as old as Columbus, and was seen by some to be immoral long before the Madisonian and Jeffersonian terminology was coined.)

Having stated the claim for the moral equiprobability of the pre-invasion vision, Tinker proceeds, since his context is Christian, to review how a creation-friendly restructuring of biblical language might work. He disavows "the value-neutral creation theology of Matthew Fox" and "new-age spirituality" in favor of a " 'theology of community' that must generate a consistent interest in justice and peace." "The oppression we have experienced is intimately linked to the way the immigrants pray and how they understand ... their relation to creation and Creator."

This is not the place to converse in detail, in an intra-Christian theological mode, about this suggested alternative. I cite Tinker only as an instance of the much more broadly represented notion, classically formulated a generation ago by Lynn White, that what went wrong in our past was the basic biblical vision of a God who acts to bring about a new history. It is formulated here in culture-to-culture terms, although of course it has close analogies in the gender agenda, as in other social justice arenas. It is important for our conversation that this critique should have been stated by Tinker in the form of an appeal to an old and viable culture and history, rather than our meeting it as we more often do in history-less trendy forms.

This polarity is so fundamental that it would seem *prima facie* that there can hardly be any place to stand from where to discuss it further, to say nothing of adjudicating it. If we had three weeks in a graduate seminar the challenge of lining up the arguments on both sides and verifying their circularity would be quite instructive. But for present purposes what I owe to you to point out is

that that debate, in addition to being petitionary, is relevant only to the past. Neither vision, neither that of the God who acts to cover the earth with a European-managed, satellite-linked system of farms, mines, stock exchanges and factories, nor that of Grandmother Earth in whom we all live and move and have our being, throws any useful light on what to do about Calcutta or Cairo or Mexico City tomorrow. Both visions fail when they collide with the finitude of the planet. Both visions appeared quite viable until WWI, and as Tinker (I think rightly) says, the short-range victory of the hebraic-European competitor since then has not been won on moral grounds. Neither however is viable in the 1990's; both would (and do, and will) let the children starve.

I can make but one fragmentary, marginal suggestion, arising from this glimpse of the hopelessness of the debate hitherto. It is that when the global system is out of control, the normal moral decency which is within our reach may matter more than the vision of an universal solution which is not. George Kennan said this once about superpower diplomacy. The same observation may be applied both to institutional systems (the New Economic Order) and to cultural ones (whether to prefer Grandmother Earth or JHWH-who-Acts).. The clash between the european immigrants and the original inhabitants of this hemisphere would have had to come out differently if both sides had listened to William Penn, had renounced recourse to lethal arms, and had constituted mediation panels (Marrin 199).

If Jesus of Nazareth is the culmination of the story of JHWH who Acts, then Constantine and Charlemagne were not. William Penn extrapolated that reconciling history, the one marked by Jesus and Francis and Fox, to the new world, as Columbus did not. There are thus more resources for system criticism within the judaic stream of affirming history than the Spanish empire represented. There are surely also resources for internal system criticism within the Grandmother Earth culture, but I am not qualified to say how. Seeking within each setting the potential for self-restraint is a more promising common exercise than debating which history was less destructive.

The arbitrament of arms is not is not wrong merely or primarily legally, because the Torah prohibits bloodshed or the Gospel prohibits enmity. It is wrong because it resolves conflicts on other grounds than the nature of the problem and the dignity of all the parties involved (including not only the human adversaries, but also the trees). To renounce violence is the first functional meaning of affirming creation or nature. To renounce violence in itself solves few problems, but it holds them open for solution.

4) "HOPE;" What is imperative is not necessary.

A major, still unresolved challenge in the study of ancient faith documents is what we should do with literature of the genre which the experts call "apocalyptic" or "unveiling." Nearly a century ago Albert Schweitzer reoriented the study of Jesus by demonstrating that it is impossible to peel off from the Gospel stories the "apocalyptic" husk, so as to leave as kernel a timeless message about God and the soul which modern readers could welcome as reinforcing ideas they already have.

But how that perspective, or that mental style, or those ideas about history which we call "apocalyptic" should be appropriated is a challenge we are far from resolving adequately. As before, I can perhaps best make my point negatively, and formally.

One function of the language of apocalypse in the life of a faith community is that it restrains the presumptuous claim to have mastered the world system, either intellectually by a set of explanations or practically by a set of power manipulations. Modern technology comes closer to "mastering" some of the angles of the way the world works, but thereby sets loose a larger set of surprising imponderables. It is culturally good for us that the promethean myth, which describes so well our technological culture's temptations and vulnerability, should be ancient. Neither the idea that we might master the secrets of physical causation, nor the awareness that when we think we have done that it merely escalates the destructiveness of our errors and ignorance, is a new insight.

Apocalypse promises, to those who cower under the threats of the tyrants of their time, that tyranny will not have the last word. It promises that the wholesome potential of creation will one day be fulfilled. It promises that diversity, and even conflict, will enrich human existence rather than destroying it. The particular cosmology, or the particular vision of miracle, in which these promises were clothed in ancient times, cannot be extrapolated literally from that century to ours; but it was not meant literally then anyway. It was meant as a call to creative response, denying the last word to a closed-system determinism.

Some interpreters of "apocalyptic" transpose the language of promise into psychology, making of "hope" the human quality of hopefulness or optimism. Others use the language of sociology, describing the resistance of a beleaguered tribe to assimilation. Others use more intellectual equivalents: what apocalypse communicates is "transcendence," or the notion of a God active in history. Each of these transpositions aims at enhancing the visions' accessibility or credibility. Each of these is a reduction. Each of them sends us down a different path, if we ask philosophically how to validate it.

There is nothing wrong with reductionism as long as it does not claim to have disposed of its object without remainder, or that its grid is the only one to use. The "remainder" that no reduction may be permitted to do away with is that the future is not exhaustively contained in the past. Fatalism as a view of the human condition can not be falsified on the basis of the past. It is always apriori evident that "you can't get there from here." Yet "apocalypse" refuses that restriction of the data.

One such reduction, self-critical in its paradoxical form, was the statement of Reinhold Niebuhr just sixty years ago:

"The truest visions of religion are illusions, which may be partly realized by being resolutely believed. For what religion believes to be true is not wholly true, but ought to be true, and may become true if its truth is not doubted. (Niebuhr, 1932, p. 81.)"

It was easier for Reinhold Niebuhr, in 1932, than it is for us today, to spell out just how we should use such confident old words as "religion", "illusion", and "true". The point remains that

the viability of our culture, as we hit the ceiling of the planet's capacity, will be correlative with our finding ways for our time, as heirs of the apocalyptic hopes of all time, to envision the world that needs to be, on other grounds than that it is the necessary product of our past.

#### Sources

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