

The Ecological Conscience - essay by Thomas Merton 1968

Do not depend on the hope of results

When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on, you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no worth at all, if not perhaps, results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you will start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself.

Thomas Merton

(The following is an excerpt from an article that appeared in the Catholic Worker, June 1968).

Man is a creature of ambiguity. His salvation and his sanity depend on his ability to harmonize the deep conflicts in his thought, his emotions, his personal mythology. Honesty and authenticity do not depend on complete freedom from contradictions – such freedom is impossible – but on recognizing our self-contradictions, and not masking them with bad faith. The conflicts in individuals are not entirely of their own making. On the contrary, many of them are imposed, readymade, by an ambivalent culture. This poses a very special problem, because he who accepts the ambiguities of his culture without protest and without criticism is rewarded with a sense of security and moral justification. A certain kind of unanimity satisfies our emotions, and easily substitutes for truth. We are content to think like the others, and in order to protect our common psychic security, we readily become blind to the contradictions – or even the lies – that we have all decided to accept as “plain truth.”

One of the more familiar ambiguities in the American mind operates in our frontier mythology, which has grown in power in proportion as we have ceased to be a frontier or even a rural people. The pioneer, the frontier culture hero, is a product of the wilderness. But at the same time he is a destroyer of the wilderness. His success as pioneer depends on his ability to fight the wilderness and win. Victory consists in reducing the wilderness to something else, a farm, a village, a road, a canal, a railway, a mine, a factory, a city – and finally an urban nation. A recent study of “Wilderness and the American Mind” by Roderick Nash (Yale University Press) is an important addition to an already significant body of literature about this subject. It traces the evolution of the wilderness idea from the first Puritan settlers via Henry David Thoreau and John Muir to the modern ecologists and preservationists – and to their opponents in

big business and politics...

Now, one of the interesting things about this ambivalence toward nature is that it is rooted in our biblical, Judeo-Christian tradition. We might remark at once that it is neither genuinely biblical nor Jewish nor Christian. Roderick Nash is perhaps a little one-sided in his analysis here. But, a certain kind of Christian culture has certainly resulted in a Manichean (good versus evil) hostility towards created nature. This, of course, we all know well enough. (The word Manichean has become a cliché of reproof like communist or racist.) But the very ones who use the cliché most may be the ones who are still unknowingly tainted, on a deep level, an unconscious level. For there is a certain popular, superficial and one-sided "Christian worldliness" that is, in its hidden implications, profoundly destructive of nature and of "God's creation" even while it claims to love and extol them...

Much of the stupendous ecological damage that has been done in the last fifty years is completely irreversible. Industry and the military, especially in America, are firmly set on policies which make further damage inevitable. There are plenty of people who are aware of the need for "something to be done," but just consider the enormous struggle that has to be waged, for instance in eastern Kentucky, to keep mining interests from completing the ruin of an area that is already a ghastly monument to callous human greed. When a choice has to be made, it is almost invariably made in the way that is good for a quick return on somebody's investment – and a permanent disaster for everybody else.

Aldo Leopold, a follower of John Muir and one of the greatest preservationists, understood that the erosion of American land was only part of a more drastic erosion of American freedom – of which it was a symptom. If "freedom" means purely and simply an uncontrolled power to make money in every possible way, regardless of consequences, then freedom becomes synonymous with ruthless, mindless and absolute exploitation. Such freedom is in fact nothing but the arbitrary tyranny of a wasteful and destructive process, glorified with big words that have lost their meaning.

Aldo Leopold brought into clear focus one of the most important moral discoveries of our time. This can be called the ecological conscience. The ecological conscience is centered in an awareness of man's true place as a dependent member of the biotic community. Man must become fully aware of his dependence on a balance which he is not only free to destroy but which he has already begun to destroy. He must recognize his obligations toward

the other members of that vital community. And incidentally, since he tends to destroy nature in his frantic efforts to exterminate other members of his own species, it would not hurt if he had a little more respect for human life too. The respect for life, the affirmation of all life, is basic to the ecological conscience.

The tragedy which has been revealed in the ecological shambles created by business and war is a tragedy of ambivalence, aggression and fear cloaked in virtuous ideas and justified by pseudo-Christian clichés. Our rather, a tragedy of pseudo-creativity deeply impregnated with hatred, megalomania and the need for domination. This is evident in the drama of the Vietnam War, cloaked as it is in the specious language of freedom and democracy. The psychological root of it is doubtless in the profound dehumanization and alienation of modern Western man, who has gradually come to mistake the artificial value of inert objects and abstractions (goods, money, property) for the power of life itself, and who is willing to place immediate profit above everything else. Money is more important, more alive than life, including the life and happiness of his closet and most intimate companions. This he can always justify by a legalist ethic or a casuistical formula of some sort, but his formulas themselves betray him and eventually lose even the meaning which has been arbitrarily forced upon them.

Aldo Leopold has defined the ecological conscience. Can such a conscience be formed and become really effective in America today? Is it likely to be? The ecological conscience is also essentially a peace-making conscience. A country that seems to be more and more oriented to permanent hot or cold war-making does not give much promise of developing either one. But perhaps the very character of the war in Vietnam – with crop poisoning, the defoliation of forest trees, the incineration of villages and their inhabitants with napalm – presents enough of a stark and critical example to remind us of this most urgent moral need. Catholic theology ought to take note of the ecological conscience and do it fast.