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In his book, The Reenchantment of the World, Morris Berman holds out the hope that there is coming about in the Western world a new understanding of human kinship with the natural world, the establishment of a new sense of awe for how the earth does its work, a new view of the earth as a holy unity alive with divinity, pulsating with wonder and mystery and once again filled with enchantment.

There is another new book, Beyond Geography by Frederick Turner, which traces out the spiritual history of the exploration and settling of the New World. Turner's purpose is to find out how we came to be like we are, by learning to understand the state of mind and spirit of the early explorers and settlers. Columbus and his successors found two continents of unbelievable charm and beauty inhabited by tribal societies living in harmony with the natural world with a system of worship expressed through the shaman and the medicineman, with a system of spirits inhabiting the forests and streams, the sun, the mountains and the animals.

Turner conveys a picture of paradise lost and a deep sense that the religion the Europeans brought with them was the root cause of a tragedy so immense that its outlines only begin to become visible as the air becomes unbreatheable and the water unfit for living things. The remnants that still exist of the vast wilderness - wilderness which was billions of years in the making, destroyed in two hundred - reveal the folly which grew out of a pathologic fear of, and hatred for, the wild things and the dark dangers that threatened from the unknown "out-there"; the unreasoning fears of the town dweller, always in terror of the night. Combine this with a religious dedication to a single jealous God who brooks no other gods, who commands the destruction of other gods; then add in a ferocious greed and you have in the hearts and minds of the newcomers, the making of the certain doom of the wilderness and its inhabitants. Combined with the mindset and the spiritual fervor and the greed was a capacity for war, for plunder and pillage, rape and ruin developed over centuries of wars with the Moors and two hundred years of church-sponsored and church-blessed crusades.

So, if today, we are locked into an economy which finds it necessary to destroy in order to prosper, it directly results from the attitudes we inherit from our forebears. From the very beginning we did it like we do it today. The earth is for plunder; exploitable people for exploitation. We are said to be recovering from a recession. The signs are seen in construction, in the greater and greater use of bulldozers, earthmovers and paving machines; in short, in more and more destruction of the natural world. A super highway traverses every forest and soon its borders are stripped and paved and factories appear. The factories process stuff extracted from the earth into trivialities which are consigned to the junk pile within months of fabrication. The toxic wastes involved in the manufacture are disposed of in air and soil and stream. The economy is so arranged that this system must grow which inevitably means that the ruin we live in is as nothing compared to what it is going to be.

What Frederick Turner says, is that this result is attributable to the spiritual state of mind with which we approach life. The roots of our ecologic crisis are religious:

Christianity had a unique orientation to the world, an orientation that emphasized the capacity of rational thought to render Christians lords of all earthly creation.

In the age of exploration Christians of all nationalities and persuasions were united in a conception of the earth as a divinely created thing, there for the enjoyment, instruction and profit of man. Though the nearest derivation of this view seems to be Augustine, who viewed the world as of no intrinsic interest, its ultimate derivation is Old Testament scripture as rendered through Christian exegetes. There, in the deeply incised record of a new monotheism turning away from the worship of the natural world toward the adoration of a god so other-worldly that his name could not even be written down, is the beginning of the superimposed sacred history. (Beyond Geography, page 174)

To make the point in another way, the ruin of the earth is attributable to what Morris Berman calls the deGodding of nature and to what Frederick Turner describes as the Judaic and Christian condemnation of the gods other traditions find in nature. It is attributable to the other-world orientation that Christian tradition gives to Christian living, the emphasis on salvation out of this world and the belief that whatever happens is bearable because God is going to make it OK in a future life. James Watt gets it exactly when he asserts that since the Second Coming is imminent there is no sense in preserving wilderness. Those who look down their noses at this crazy kind of fundamentalism are not superior to James Watt. In a very real sense he is the archetypal American Christian.

If we are going to enter into the new world view it is going to be the result of a new understanding of what we are doing to the earth and why that is so abhorrent. It is going to depend on a reinterpretation of our religion illuminated by the growing comprehension for the involvement of the earth and the earth process in the formation of the human mind and the human soul. What we are, in every way, is an evolved phenomenon, evolved out of the earth. We have not been able, except over the past few decades, to get a kind of agreement in science and philosophy and theology that the earth process is the origin of humankind in its totality.

Maybe it is too late. Maybe the earth is doomed. But maybe it is not. Jane Sharp, President of the North Carolina Conservation Council, recently said to me that she had hope in the fact that growing understanding for what is happening may make us able to pull back from the cliff. Thomas Berry said:

My question is: After we burn the lifeboat how will we stay afloat? What will then be the need of religion, Christianity or the Church? Presently the Church has a unique opportunity to place its vast authority, its energies, its educational resources, its spiritual disciplines in a creative context, one that can assist in renewing the earth as a bio-spiritual planet. If this is not done immediately, then by the end of this century an overwhelming amount of damage will have been done, an immense number of living species will be irrecoverably lost for all future generations. Only by assuming its religious responsibility for the fate of the earth can the Church regain any authentic status either in the human community or in the earth process.