

CENTER FOR REFLECTION ON THE SECOND LAW

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November 21, 1986

Circular No.81

Well, we held our conference, ECOLOGY - THE SPIRITUAL IMPERATIVE, and people seemed to like it, some ninety of them. They liked it enough to give considerable support for doing the same thing next year when Halloween falls on a Saturday, and we can again call on ancestors around a fire, under the sky, in the hearing of the owls, in the presence of children, in that wonderful place, Camp New Hope.

We meant to talk a lot about spirituality itself, but we talked more about the kinds of things that spirituality activates and about the necessity for a spiritual foundation for an environmental ethic. Peter Borrelli makes that point. Margot Adler brings in the basic human need to work with nature. Those perceptions motivate the planners putting together the upcoming North American Conference on Christianity and Ecology. It was participation in that planning that gave us the idea to focus this conference on spirituality. It turns out that spirituality is a hot subject. Charlene Spretnak was surprised to learn about the demand for her book, The Spiritual Dimension of Green Politics, Bear & Co., Santa Fe, and I was surprised to see how many people wanted to be at Camp New Hope. I have the clear impression, however, that the response would have been a lot smaller if the conference had been billed under the banner of "Christian". And that needs some comment.

A highlight of the conference was the Halloween celebration on Friday night which took place after Margot Adler's opening talk, itself oriented to an appreciation for the natural world, to earth religion to natural religion, as well as to women. There was, I thought, a pervasive feeling of kinship among us, a common belief that the earth is important to our sense of the spiritual, that its fate is in doubt and that its fate depends on how humans perceive their relation to it. We wanted to pay it homage, and we felt free to express ourselves in terms of a spirituality that does not depend on a book, but on one's sense of the earth, of trees and leaves and cold rainy air and the dark and a fire in a pit around which we circled recalling grandmothers and asking that their spirits be present. We reminded ourselves of totem animals, imitated the cry of the heron, the honk of the goose, the quiet of cats, the calm of the ruminant beasts. And for a while at least, a deep sense of belonging to the magnificence of creation, of sharing an identity with the rest of the creatures, of being a species among species, settled on us. As we remembered those who preceded us, those whose blood flows in us, we knew with a shiver that we will surely join them in that vast stage of the universe process. The ritual was one we invented ourselves; Amy Hannon, Margot Adler, Cynthia Crosson, Milo Guthrie, Zach Ralston and others. Anybody can do it. On Halloween there are ghosts about and they are to be acknowledged.

It was clear enough as we went about it that this was a "pagan" thing, alien to many, disturbing and discomfiting for a few (some separated themselves). I think the reason for the discomfiture derives from the way we grew up, trained to find spiritual expression only in direct interaction with the divine and manifested only in church-established and church-sanctioned ritual. Ritual honoring of the earth in its non-human aspects is strange to many of us, but not all, by any means. But it felt right to dance around a fire and honor ancestors, honor sky and water, field and mouse, worm and turtle, forest and plain. Why has not Christianity, which adopted so much from the pre-Christians, not (yet?) adopted this deep reverence for the earth. Why has Christianity not been influenced by the religion of the Native Americans, of the Buddhists, the Hindus in this regard? There are

scholars who say that a choice was made in the early church to emphasize the importance of the human species rather than the importance of the whole of creation. (See Cry of the Environment, a book of essays assembled by Joranson and Butigan, Bear & Co. Also, see The Spirit of the Earth, by John Hart, Paulist Press). Is this the root cause for the anthropocentric mind of Western religion and Western society?

There is a whole lot of argument about that but no need to try and summarize it here. The question is why did we feel that our conference had to avoid the label "Christian". I think (comment is solicited) the reason is that that label would have indicated that what we were going to talk about would center on God and Jesus. and I think that people strongly attracted to ecological practises have found almost no support there. They have heard ten million sermons prominently featuring a God and a Jesus seemingly not one bit interested in the state of non-human creation, in the condition of water and air, possums and skunks, forests and streams. Church instruction does not link humans up with creation, with the wilderness in any integral way. So there has arisen an estrangement. But the community of ecologically aware people is distinctly spiritual. And they are religious in the sense that they want their lives to reflect their deepest beliefs, to realize that they belong, that there are other people like themselves. They want to sing and dance, make poetry, find identity. They want to pray and to meditate, but they find emptiness in churches where Yuppie congregations are affirmed every Sunday, where little serious assault is made on an unjust economic system which destroys both land and people. (The Catholic Bishop's economic Pastoral is a noteworthy but partial exception.) They are delighted to find that there is such a thing as a theology of the earth, a creation spirituality that makes one at home on this planet, in this region, in interaction with this ecology, that finds beauty here and now, that embraces the new origin story, and the revelations of our own age. They are delighted to find in the gathering a monk, a couple of nuns, an acclaimed theologian, several humanist scholars and academics, two witches, several people who have opted out of mainstream America, nonconsumers, many from the peace movement, and a couple from the business world.

So, we did not label it "Christian". But that does not alter the fact that there were committed Christians there who joined in wholeheartedly. And it does not alter the fact that if our earth is to be saved Christians are going to be the key. I think it was Peter Borrelli who said that since our sense of right and wrong is pretty much derived out of the Judeo-Christian tradition any big change in our behaviour must be energized out of that traditon.

And that brings me back to the **North American Conference on Christianity and Ecology**. It takes place in **North Webster, Indiana in August of 1987**. Maybe that conference will begin an acceleration of the slowly growing awareness that a desolated earth is demonstration of an irrelevant religion. I need to start putting together a list of those interested in supporting this conference. Let me hear from you, please.

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We make, in this issue, the second annual appeal for financial support. Please send a contribution in the enclosed envelope. One time per year is enough. Contributions are tax deductible. If you do not send anything let us hear from you anyway wo we will know you are there.