

“Theology of the Land” Book Abstract

FACT: “farming” has morphed from its ethical, spiritual roots to become chemical “pharming”.

QUESTION: Where are bishops, the Church, and the National Catholic Rural Life Conference (NCRLC) in this unjust overreach (prostitution of agriculture) by the pharmaceutical (tobacco & petrochemical) industry?

Church, like people, loses perspective if it loses its sense of belonging in, with and to the community of nature. Vatican II inspired promising beginnings toward the renewal of Church and society. If theology calls for a communitarian society, then Church should model ethically, symbiotically, the communitarian society called for. Post Vatican II, Liberation theology pursued the communitarian renewal of Church and society. Where does the effort stand forty years later?

Pope Benedict XVI told a congregation at a Palm Sunday service that "earnings, success and career must not be the ultimate scope of life." He said that only those with "hands not soiled with corruption" could expect to reach God.

In 1985, the Virgil Michel Ecumenical Chair in Rural Social Ministries (St. John's University, Collegeville, MN) and the National Catholic Rural Life Conference (Des Moines, IA) began an ongoing study of the “Theology of the Land”. Like all who attended the Conference, I came away encouraged and motivated to persevere in the compelling call of Vatican II. A distinguished panel articulated the “general dimensions of a new theology or ethic of land ownership and land use... LEONARD WEBER examines the economic philosophy that has shaped American attitudes toward property in general; he proposes alternative models and directions for socially responsible land ownership and use. WALTER BRUEGGEMANN explores the biblical covenantal relationship as a way for us to speak about land management. C. DEAN FREUDENBERGER addresses the implications of a new land ethic for the food and environmental crisis that has spread across the entire globe. JOHN HART offers the creation-focused spirituality and religious faith of Native American peoples as source for rethinking land ethics in America... RICHARD AUSTIN proposes the rebuilding of human relationships with the land in the context of environmental concerns and the rights inherent in the land.” [Co-Editor Bernard F. Evans, Chairman, Virgil Michel Chair; the other Co-Editor is Gregory D Cusack, then Director of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference (NCRLC).

Leonard Weber: “...contemporary Americans do not really understand the American ethical heritage, and...the extent to which the heritage has shaped national policies...I read with interest and with much admiration ‘The Spirit of Earth’ (John Hart). Hart stressed that aspect of American heritage he sees converging with his own Christian theology of the land...he clearly acknowledges that his vision is at odds with the dominant American tradition...it is necessary to try to make clear why it is...that this vision is radical and morally unacceptable...It is my task to discuss the understanding of land-use ethics that is presently found in

this country. This gives me the opportunity to describe the dominant American tradition as well as to reflect on alternative systems of social ethics...The land-use ethic that contemporary American society has intended is primarily an economic ethic. The value of land is determined almost exclusively by its role in the market system...land has no real value until it is 'improved' (John Locke)...when labor is mixed with it...The focus here is not so much on what I can claim for myself...It is to think more about our social obligations...A human rights starting point that recognizes social/economic rights as well as civil/political rights leads us to...responsibility toward others...What should be expected of business is that it is beneficial to society...I am suggesting...that we may want to make use of the evolving concept (Paul VI 'Populorum Progressio') of social responsibility within a framework of an emphasis on human rights...The concept might allow us to move away from emphasis on individual rights toward an emphasis on the common good."

Walter Brueggemann: "...*Adam*, that is, mankind, has a partner and mate, *adamah*, land. Humankind and land are thus linked in a covenantal relationship, analogous to the covenantal relationship between man and woman...unfortunately, in our society we have terribly distorted relationships between man and woman, between *adam* and *adamah*, distortions that combine promiscuity and domination...Likely, we shall not correct one of these deadly distortions unless we correct them both. We shall not have a new land ethic until we have a new sexual ethic, free of both promiscuity and domination. Applied to land, we shall not have fertility until we have justice toward the land and toward those who depend on the land for life, which means all the brothers and sisters... It is clear that a land ethic that uses, abuses, and discards is a practice of pollution and fickleness. It creates a fundamental cleavage between a Creator who wills life and a creation that squanders and finally rejects life..."

C. Dean Freudenberger: "...We are not free to do with the land as we please; rather we, created in God's image, have been endowed with the responsibility for maintaining justice and righteousness within dominion. This requires the restoration and preservation of all the resources of the domain... Where humanity recognizes the collision course of its technosphere with the biosphere of its inheritance, pondering the issue of the theology of the land results in recognition of the need to shift from a human-centeredness to a God-centeredness."

John Hart: "...the congressional gavel hammers away treaties and pounds into dust their promises to Native Americans... Hovering in the background, benefiting from those gavels, are a handful of individuals and corporate controllers: this wealthy elite expects to profit from the poverty of the masses of displaced peoples of the land and to exercise greater political and economic power over the land, its fruit and its people... There is a crisis of ownership...there is a crisis of value...the attitude of greed is primarily an atheistic and anti-social perspective... for people of faith, a basic consideration between the

prevailing profit ideology that elevates greed to a virtue and religious teachings that recognize greed as a vice and propose stewardship and sharing as virtues... Spirituality for native peoples is creation-focused, that is, there is a strong link, a deep sense of relationship, to the created world. Any concept of human superiority to, or domination over the rest of creation is foreign and repugnant... Change is possible, and the best hope for change is advocacy of justice by the churches. Church...must speak out for social change, and, through educational efforts and coalitions with groups able to work together on specific issues, create a better future... There must be a fundamental reform on land... Land must be used in such a way that it is carefully conserved and restored so that earth might regenerate herself and care for future generations of life forms that depend on her."

Richard Cartwright Austin: "My concern is rebuilding human relationships with the land. In the Bible I find a moral ecology—a vision of beautiful relationships between nature, humanity and the Lord... This biblical ecology involves the rescue of both humanity and land from oppression... In biblical tradition the Sabbath was more than a day of compulsory worship... Through the Sabbath tradition the Hebrews discovered design in relations between the Lord and the world, between humanity and nature, and within human society... The authors of Genesis understood the cycle of creative energy: work was not complete until there was rest, reflection, worship and celebration... For the first time in history...in the West... the majority of men and women do not work in direct contact with the land, the sea, or the species of natural life... Does the earth benefit from this reduced human presence? Not at all. We burden the earth even more than before... As society leaves the earth to machines, and the few people remaining are trained to think like machines, the earth suffers... Instead of 'compulsory recreation' I propose a human right of access to nature... The image of God in the biblical understanding implies a human vocation to express to nature, by our care for it, the justice and love of God... If we lose contact with God, we lose touch with the source of our life and with the beauty of transcendent justice and compassion... As the screws tighten, we will be pushed to exploit each other and to exploit land and environment ever more harshly. It is a wicked predicament for a once free people ... Part of the answer is to reopen the frontier... a first step is to legislate that the holding of land by profit-seeking corporations is inherently inappropriate... their bottom-line nature forces them to regard land as a commodity and to exploit it... the human religious impulse [is] to see divinity in nature or through nature... We are called neither to worship or abuse nature, but to live creatively and productively with our fellow creatures... to tend and keep the earth as God would have it kept... Peace on earth includes sustainable ecological peace, peace among species, and peace with our natural environment." [THEOLOGY OF THE LAND, Bernard F. Evans and Gregory D. Cusack, editors, 1987, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Mn. ISBN 0-8146-1554-6 Abstract prepared by Sylvester L. Steffen]