



Ecological Sin

By William H. Becker

"Sinful spiritual assumptions have an addictive quality, which tends to make them immune to questioning and to challenge.... This mentality informs and permeates all our thoughts and deeds, even those that appear contrary to it. We may recycle newspapers and glass, and we may take proper satisfaction in doing so, but we remain caught in a web of spiritual assumptions about success and consumption, progress and waste, that effectively undermine and trivialize our efforts to escape. "

Our present ecological situation is well illustrated in this recent cartoon by Pulitzer Prize winning political cartoonist Jim Borgman:



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This cartoon could well be titled "Ecological Sin," for it makes visible the tension between what we are doing as a society and what we know we should do. We see ourselves caught, doing "not what I want" but "the very thing I hate."

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I

The Christian doctrine of original sin can help clarify our understanding of the present ecological crisis, in four respects. It can expose to view: (1) the powerful role of social and economic forces that promote ecological self-destructiveness and have the appearance of "necessity" or "destiny," though they involve human choice; (2) our culture's pervasive confusion of material success with spiritual fulfillment; (3) our addiction to what we know is destroying us; and (4) the totalitarian character of our ecocidal mentality, which influences all dimensions of our culture, diminishing our ability to reason even as it distorts our desiring and willing.

One major function of the doctrine of original sin, as developed in the Christian tradition, is to highlight the tendency toward estrangement and self-destructive choices, an inescapable "given" of human existence. Sin is chosen (otherwise it would simply be necessary evil), and the choice is central to the very identity of the chooser. But the choice is made in a social context that predetermines its direction. "The historical dimension of estrangement," as Langdon Gilkey says, is "passed on communally. We absorb more than our cultural ethos-language, concepts, norms, and so on—from our own heritage; we also absorb that community's 'fallen' character—its centering of its world on itself, its inordinate self-love and love of its own."¹

The doctrine of original sin helps us see that we are socializing ourselves to sin ecologically. Our present anti-ecological behavior is thoroughly rooted in a social context actively supported and promoted by a powerful process of socialization and education. As the Borgman cartoon makes clear, we are teaching ourselves, even during the very process of carrying out our small bin of recyclables, that our overarching duty and purpose as citizens is to buy, to consume, to waste, and to promote growth and prosperity. This explains why newborn babies are described as affected by original sin, not because of their deeds but on the basis of the social-educational context in which and by which they are being formed. Though they did not choose to be, they are already wrapped in disposable diapers!

How have we come to this place? *Why* do we socialize ourselves and our children, using the most powerful media of communication at our disposal, to want more and waste more, even though we know we thereby mortgage our future?

We do this ecological evil because we believe it to be spiritually good. We do this because, looking at it from a carefully constructed social and economic perspective, we find fundamental spiritual meaning and satisfaction in it; it is our symbol of being "number one" and blessed by God. In his book *The Poverty of Affluence*, Paul Wachtel suggests that this ecological destructiveness seems logical and attractive because we have socialized ourselves to see economic well-being,

¹ Langdon Gilkey, *Message and Existence* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), p. 142.



which requires ever-increasing economic growth, as the primary symbol and proof of personal and social success, worthiness, identity, and meaning.

Wachtel argues that, unlike most humans before the modern era, we in the industrialized West, particularly the United States, lack a deep sense of rootedness in family, community, and religion, often seeking our personal identity and sense of worth precisely by moving away from and "higher than" our place of origin. In the absence of such traditional ties "our place in the social order is less clearly demarcated and less securely held. We have no reserved seats. We must *win* our place."² Economic competition and accumulation, Wachtel believes, are now the culturally approved arenas for testing ourselves and winning our place. But there is a vicious circle inherent in this substitution of material goods for psychological-spiritual fulfillment because there can never be enough economic growth. The economic pie must keep expanding, not simply to provide more opportunity for those who have not yet won their place, but to provide more for those who, having won, find that the struggle to win must nonetheless continue. "In America, we keep upping the ante.... 'Enough' is always just over the horizon, and like the horizon it recedes as we approach it.... Wanting more remains a constant, regardless of what we have.... [W]e have established a pattern in which we continually create discontent."³

Whereas Wachtel writes as a psychologist, Gilkey makes essentially the same argument in a theological discussion of the doctrine of original sin. He sees in our economic system an unrelenting spiritual lust, traditionally called "concupiscence," which, in the absence of genuine spiritual meaning, drives people to seek fulfillment by devouring more and more of the world around them. "The central dynamic of this infinite demand is not anxiety about security but desire, lust for more and more, and impatience and dissatisfaction with what is now possessed, a sense of yearning emptiness if more is not gained, of felt conviction that meaning, be it excitement or satisfaction, comes only with continual accession."⁴

Sinful spiritual assumptions have an addictive quality, which tends to make them immune to questioning and to challenge. Thus, Thomas Berry describes Americans today as "autistic" with respect to nature. We are a people "so locked up in themselves that no one and nothing else can get in.... We are talking to ourselves. We are not talking to the river, we are not listening to the river."⁵ Berry sees this isolation as the result of false spiritual assumptions, which are "addictive; we are caught up in them and we cannot get out.... [E]ven with death facing

² Paul Wachtel, *The Poverty of Affluence* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1989), p. 62.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴ Gilkey, p. 152.

⁵ Thomas Berry and Thomas Clarke, *Befriending the Earth* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991), p. 20.



us in the collapse of our monumental establishments, we refuse to alter the direction we have chosen."⁶ This mentality informs and permeates all our thoughts and deeds, even those that appear contrary to it. We may recycle newspapers and glass, and we may take proper satisfaction in doing so, but we remain caught in a web of spiritual assumptions about success and consumption, progress and waste, that effectively undermine and trivialize our efforts to escape. With the cartoon figure, we too "sigh."

Moreover, this web of assumptions, while it may originate in and center on the economic realm, has a totalitarian character, which pervades all our social institutions and cultural reflection. "Because of this rejection of the discipline imposed by nature, our religion, morality, civilization, major establishments - everything - have become counter-productive. They are producing the opposite of what they should produce."⁷

The cultural pathology Thomas Berry identifies here is precisely the same phenomenon that earlier theologians, exploring the doctrine of original sin, referred to as "total depravity." This is the all-pervading presence of sin (the assumptions or perspectives of sinfulness) in *all* the faculties of the human mind (not simply our emotions and will, but our reason as well) and in *all* aspects of human society (not simply economics or the material realm, but also in education, religion, and the highest ideals of a culture). The term "total depravity" is not intended to suggest that the individual or society is one-hundred percent sinful, without a scintilla of goodness, but, rather, that there is no aspect of the self or society genuinely free from sin and able to "lead the way" out of sin.

II

Given the relevance of the doctrine of original sin in analyzing our ecological crisis - a relevance so direct that it can be suggested in the simple images of a political cartoon-one would expect the doctrine to be widely employed by contemporary Christian ecological theologians. Why, instead, is it largely ignored by Christian theologians who focus on ecology?⁸

Perhaps the most obvious answer is that this doctrine is largely ignored by "mainstream" American Christians in general. Emphasizing, as it does, the influence of socialization on the formation of individual identity, the inescapable limitations on an individual's freedom to choose, the responsibility and guilt of the individual for choices which, while genuine, have in some sense been "made for him"

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 46,51.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁸ There are only two references to sin, for example, in the index of Jay B. McDaniel's *Earth, Sky, Gods and Mortals: Developing an Ecological Spirituality* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1990). Wesley Granberg-Michaelson's *A Worldly Spirituality The Call to Redeem Life on Earth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984) contains only one such reference.



by his society, the doctrine of original sin cannot easily be "marketed" in a society that maximizes individual freedom and rights. Conservative Christians, who do continue to emphasize this doctrine, generally do so in a highly individualized way, which effectively serves to "Americanize" it.

Yet, despite the unfashionable character of the term original sin among theologians, the "logic" of the doctrine⁹ is widely assumed by secular writers in their analyses of current social issues. Students of racism, for example, use this logic to analyze both the racists' conviction of their superiority, and the minorities' tendency toward self-hatred. Both are understood to participate in a racist system of socialization, which makes these attitudes "inevitable"; yet, at the same time, both are responsible for these attitudes, which they have in some sense "chosen" or accepted as part of their identity.

Many contemporary feminist writers (including some who are highly critical of traditional Christian theology) have employed the logic of original sin in their critique of patriarchy. To be sure, some feminists apply the doctrine only to the "enemy," namely men or, more specifically, white men, rather than to the entire human race. "If we have any true love for the stars, planets, the rest of Creation, we must do everything we can to keep white men away from them." So writes Alice Walker, who describes white men as those "who have never met any new creature without exploiting, abusing, or destroying it.... Under the white man every star would become a South Africa, every planet a Vietnam."¹⁰ For Mary Daly, too, women live "on a planet which is under the Reign of Terror, the reign of the fathers and sons."¹¹ She condemns what she calls the "rapism" of patriarchy, which she sees expressed in the "rapes of our sisters.... the rape of southeast Asia, of racial minorities, and of the environment" ¹² In perspectives such as these, Sam Keen observes, "'Patriarchy' is the devil term, the code word for the evil empire of men, the masculine conspiracy that has dominated human history since the time of the fall."¹³

Given the polemical character of these views one is tempted simply to dismiss the significance of radical feminism to our question. But this would be a mistake, for a good many militant feminists have, in fact,

⁹ Basic elements of this logic, often paradoxical but derived from experience, are: (1) Our choices are formed by social forces beyond ourselves (hence "inevitable"), yet are, at the same time, authentic expressions of our identity as persons (hence "chosen"); (2) the forces beyond ourselves that inform our choices often correlate with and derive from social groups to which we belong, perhaps from the human race itself; hence, (3) it is possible for me (on the basis of my socialization) to see as "good," and to choose as "good," what is actually "evil" (i.e., destructive of life, both personal, social, and non-human).

¹⁰ Alice Walker, "Only Justice Can Stop a Curse," in *Reweaving the Web of Life*, edited by Pam McAllister (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1982), p. 265.

¹¹ Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 40.

¹² Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 35.

¹³ Sam Keen, *Fire in the Belly* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), p. 197.



moved beyond their own rhetoric to see that, however much (white) males may be responsible for the sin of patriarchy, and however tempting and politically useful it may be to hold (white) males responsible for all the other evils in the universe, all human beings, of either gender and of all shades of skin, are complicit in and responsible for the human degradation of the planet. Rethinking her position, Alice Walker has written in a recent essay: "Some of us have become used to thinking that woman is the nigger of the world, that a person of color is the nigger of the world, that a poor person is the nigger of the world.... But, in truth, Earth itself has become the nigger of the world.... While the Earth is 'a nigger,' it has no choice but to think of us all as Wasichus [white men]."¹⁴ Walker goes on to speak of accountability for ecological sin in the same racial terms (the entire human race) that Augustinians and Calvinists have traditionally used to elucidate the doctrine of original sin:

Being an individual doesn't matter. Just as human beings perceive all trees as one.... all human beings, to the trees, are one. We are judged by our worst collective behavior, since it is so vast; not by our singular best. The Earth holds us responsible for our crimes against it, not as individuals, but as a species.... I found (this] to be a terrifying thought. For I had assumed that the Earth ... noticed exceptions-those who wantonly damage it and those who do not. But the Earth is wise. It has given itself into the keeping of us all, and all are therefore accountable.¹⁵

Walker's pointed application of original sin to the ecological issue serves to press again our question, why is it that ecological theologians have, in general, avoided reference to this doctrine? Examination of some of their writings suggests the following answers. First, many theologians concerned with ecology have concluded that Christianity's abysmal record on this issue is due largely to its central focus on the process of human redemption from sin, hence on Christ the redeemer, with a consequent deemphasis on God as Creator, on God's presence in and concern with all of creation. These theologians propose to rectify this preoccupation with redemption by swinging the pendulum of Christian theology toward a new emphasis on the creation at large, including all creatures, as an expression and revelation of God. Hence, for example, Matthew Fox's "creation spirituality" and Thomas Berry's argument that the Christian "creed itself is overbalanced in favor of redemption.... Creation becomes increasingly less important."¹⁶

In the second place, emphasis upon the fall of humankind and original sin suggests that the world as a whole is fallen, which easily leads to the traditional Christian theological (though essentially anti-biblical) conclusion that matter, the body, and sexuality are now somehow problematic, even malignant, although they were created

¹⁴ Alice Walker, "Everything is a Human Being," in *Living by the Word* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1988), p. 147.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹⁶ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), p. 126.



good. "A fall/redemption tradition," writes Matthew Fox, "by devaluating the spirituality of matter, has led people to believe that spiritual depth consists in letting go of things" by ascetically separating oneself from this world.¹⁷ Restoring the dignity and spiritual integrity of the material world, according to this logic, seems to entail deemphasis on the fall and original sin.

Third, ecological theologians avoid this doctrine because it is the basis for the doctrine of salvation by a divine savior. Original sin understands human nature to be so distorted ("totally depraved") by sin that it no longer possesses a clear apprehension of God's goodness and love and is inclined inevitably to choose what is evil. Given this utterly fallen condition, humanity is not capable of saving itself; a divine savior is required. In an interesting passage, Thomas Berry argues that Paul stressed the doctrine of original sin precisely because he wished to heighten the significance of Jesus the Christ as a savior. "In order to exalt the Christ redemptive process, St. Paul has to have something that we need to be redeemed from."¹⁸

This issue of "needing a savior" is crucial to virtually any theology of ecology because such theologies typically, sometimes angrily, repudiate the notion that God will somehow get the human race out of the ecological fix we have gotten ourselves into. "Many people wonder if all we should do now is trust in God. But God is not going... to pick up the pieces and remedy the disasters we bring about.... God is functioning through ourselves. God is telling us what to do... through the natural world."¹⁹

III

The doctrine of original sin has a great deal to offer any Christian theology of ecology, beyond serving as a tool for the analysis of our situation. It can also stand as a central concept in formulating a constructive Christian theological response to this crisis in a manner that will energize, motivate, and empower us to act in realistic ways:

(1) *Ecological religion*. Current ecological consciousness assumes, on biological grounds, what the Genesis story of the fall assumes on religious grounds: There is an inescapable connection between human decision and the destiny of the planet. It is now not theological rhetoric for us to say that humans are co-creators with God; this is literally, tangibly, the case. Now that the effects of our destruction are becoming visible, we are able to see and measure, ironically, the real meaning of our co-creator status. Only if we can accept our responsibility as co-creators will the creation continue in its present already-diminished fecundity and beauty. The concept of ecological sin sheds important

¹⁷ Matthew Fox, "Sin, Salvation, Christ in the Perspective of the Via Negativa," in Roger Gottlieb, *A New Creation* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), p. 24.

¹⁸ Berry and Clarke, p. 70.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.



light on what will be required of us, if we are to become co-creators in this sense.

Part of the logic of the doctrine of original sin is that the human situation is so thoroughly depraved that a divine savior is required if humankind is to be restored to health. If we take this logic seriously with respect to ecological sin, and if (following the lead of current ecological theologians) we assume that no divine savior will intervene to undo our self-destructive ecocide, then we are faced with yet another terrifying thought: not simply that we may not be able to save the planet, but that we may not be able, truly and wholeheartedly, to will to save it. Our fundamental challenge is not simply changing our economy but rather changing ourselves. Can we, given our ecological sin, muster the will to change what we are?

This is a terribly daunting question, so much so that one hesitates even to state it. But it is also true that, if we fail to face this question, we will be unable to assume the full burden of co-creators. Given the enormous power of the anti-ecological system of socialization now in place (economic "growth-think," transnational corporations, the barrage of multi-media advertising, the consumer mentality dominant in politics, education, and even religion), it is absurd to imagine that significant ecological change can be realized simply through *ad hoc* recycling projects and educational campaigns designed to change individual behavior. Significant change will require counter-socialization, systematic and conscious efforts to re-socialize ourselves spiritually, away from our present materialistic consumer spirituality and toward a new "materialistic" (in the sense of matter-respecting) creation spirituality. It would require that we introduce ecological religion into our civil religion.

The civil religion of our nation has been exposed as fundamentally anthropocentric and anti-ecological. Americans are now challenged to take responsibility for this sinful system of education by replacing it with a new ecological religion. We are challenged to probe the ecological implications of slogans and concepts we have long taken for granted. What are "growth" and "progress" when these are understood to refer to all of life, not just Americans, not just humans? What is "love" that encompasses the Whole, not just the human part? What is "freedom" that goes beyond the rights of human persons to include other species, that goes beyond the present to include future possibility?

Recognition of our ecological sin will also require the revisioning of fundamental Christian doctrines, beginning perhaps with the doctrine of sin itself. If we humans, through overpopulation, greed, and pollution, should render the earth uninhabitable for ourselves and many other creatures, would that be a sin only against future human generations and against God, as some Christians now argue? Or would that be a sin against all our "neighbors," all fellow creatures who are dependent on our deeds, whether they are human or not?



(2) *Ecological Repentance*. If, as the ecological theologians argue, our pollution of the soil, air, and water has meant the suffering and extinction of millions of our fellow creatures and thousands of our sister species, and if these creatures and species are, like us, creatures of God and spiritual beings, then we are faced with an enormous burden of guilt and responsibility. We wear an ecological mark of Cain. The death and loss we have caused staggers the imagination, and only with an attitude of grief, spiritual sorrow, and repentance will we be able to face the pain of that imagining. Insofar as we are willing to face it, we shall have to endure the spiritual nausea expressed by a Vietnam veteran who revised Psalm 23 to read:

Yea as I walk through the valley of death
I shall fear no evil
For the valleys are gone
And only death awaits
And I am the evil.²⁰

Even among those who are facing up to our ecological crisis, there are some, including some ecological theologians, who will argue against this emphasis upon grief, guilt, and repentance. They will do so primarily out of the fear that any such focus on our guilt—which is literally deep as the oceans, planetary in scope—will produce paralyzing self-disgust and inaction. What we need now is action, and action requires energy. Thomas Berry argues that we need "exceptional energy resources. Where does energy come from in such crisis moments? There are, I think, two sources—terror and attraction."²¹ We will experience "terror," presumably, as we realize the extent to which we are literally destroying ourselves by poisoning our habitat. We will experience "attraction" to a new story or myth which imaginatively reintegrates the human race into the rest of creation.

But repentance, along with terror and attraction, is a necessary part of ecological consciousness raising. It would be necessary to repent even if it did lead to paralysis, because we are guilty of causing incalculable death and loss and, however tempting it may be to "move on and forget the past" (as we Americans like to say), that option is not consistent with spiritual honesty and integrity. We know that, as the doctrine of original sin teaches, we have indeed chosen to exalt ourselves over the rest of creation. We have willingly caused what Martin Buber called a "wound in the order of being," and healing that wound in the planet's being and in our own requires repentance. Indeed, any "terror" we feel at the threat of our self-destruction, without accompanying repentance, is but a further expression of human arrogance.

But the fact is that this exploration need not be paralyzing. Guilt and grief may be experiences of numbness and stasis, but this usually

²⁰ Robert Lifton, *Home from the War* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 122.

²¹ Berry, p. 94.



happens when they are denied, repressed as too painful to face. It is striking to note how many ecofeminist thinkers, even those who may be highly critical of what they see as an overemphasis upon guilt and obedience in patriarchal theology, are adamant that we cannot move beyond our present crisis without going through the pain and grief that belong to a full experience of it. We must "become more and more aware of how we run away from and deny pain and [must] become more open to pain (and to joy).... In allowing pain to be, we find, paradoxically, how to transform it into peace, trust, and joy. But this transformation is not possible without first allowing ourselves to pass through what some have called the Dark Night of the Soul."²² Certainly, it seems logical to argue that it would not be possible to move to a new "attractive" myth of spiritual kinship with our fellow creatures, whom we have destroyed and are destroying, without first allowing ourselves to pass through a long, profound process of ecological repentance. Our spiritual kin will expect this of us.

Some deep ecologists have already shown the way toward ritual expression of such ecological repentance in "Council of All Beings," ceremonies that "weave together three important themes: mourning, remembering, and speaking from the perspective of other life forms."

Humans! I, Mountain, am speaking. You cannot ignore me! I have been with you since your very beginnings and long before. For millenia your ancestors venerated my holy places, found wisdom in my heights. I gave you shelter and far vision. Now, in return, you ravage me.... Stripping my forests, you take away my capacity to hold water and release it slowly. See the silted rivers? See the floods? Can't you see? In destroying me you destroy yourselves. For Gaia's sake, wake up!²³

Humans who hear, as one being after another challenges them, inevitably experience anguish, grief, and despair. Yet this is not a despair that leaves participants crushed and defeated, because in this ritual context "new energy, creativity and empowerment can be released. Unblocking these feelings also opens us to experiencing our fundamental interconnectedness with all life."²⁴

(3) *Ecological reparations.* If the fish of the sea and the birds of the air are in fact creatures of the biblical creator, then they presumably will also expect our repentance to express itself in action, deeds that take account of their basic survival needs. Jesus taught, according to Matthew 25, that it is the deeds of love (providing shelter, food and drink, care) toward human "least of these" by which he would judge the faithfulness of his followers. Presumably, our non-human kin can justly claim even more to be the "least of these" than those in Jesus'

²² Miriam Greenspan, "A Social-Spiritual Model for Feminist Therapy," in Gottlieb, p. 288.

²³ John Seed, et al., *Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1988), pp. 14, 87.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.



parable, for they lack human voice and have not hitherto had access, except through a few saints like Francis, to human councils.

Realizing how far we humans are from doing deeds of love to the rest of creation, we must begin with deeds of justice, reparations for the harm we have caused. These would take both positive forms (for example, spending public and corporate funds to restore natural habitat) and negative ones (restricting the growth of human populations and forgoing economic "growth" as it is usually defined).

The concept of reparations, while on the face of it a theological and legal category, has parallels in biology and ecology. "It is self-sacrifice that makes the universe possible. Every living being is sacrificed for other living beings. We will eventually be sacrificed for the small bacterial forms that will consume us."²⁵ The tragic flaw in our industrial-technological civilization, which is at once a moral-spiritual and a biological-ecological flaw, is that it seeks to evade this law of sacrifice and reciprocity. Not only are we taking from the earth without giving back, worse, we are, as Thomas Berry has said, "taking beneficial resources and giving back poisonous products."

Ecological reparations would contribute in six ways toward meeting the complex challenge we face, with potentially profound effects on ourselves, on the welfare of our fellow creatures, on our relations with human neighbors now harmed by ecological sin: (i) They would express our ecological repentance in concrete deeds of human self-limitation and self-sacrifice. (ii) They would introduce the concept of justice or reciprocity into our relations with nature, a step toward the new ecological "justice/love" in which we must socialize ourselves. Education toward the control of human populations could make effective use of this perspective. (iii) They would provide financial resources for restoring the balance of nature and limiting the human tendency to ignore that balance.

The other three contributions make clear the inseparable connections between ecological justice and social justice; they involve reparations to those human neighbors who have been most harmed by ecological sin. Such reparations would (iv) contribute toward communication and reconciliation between the industrialized world and surviving indigenous peoples in many nations whose lands and ecologically-based cultures can still be protected from full-scale "civilization," whose ecological wisdom can still be spoken and heard. (v) They would help undo the effects of "environmental racism," in which toxic production and wastes are located in the living space of those who are politically and economically powerless to resist. (vi) They would help address the powerful but misleading argument from developing nations that ecology is primarily a concern of privileged first-world people, a luxury that the poor cannot afford. Reparations must be paid in proportion to the damage done and the wealth available. Repara-

²⁵ Berry and Clarke, p. 134.



tions are a way for first-world nations like the United States to "walk our talk."

(4) *Ecological realism*. There is a certain realism in the doctrine of original sin that must be part of any adequate constructive approach to our present crisis. It is realistic in that it takes full account of the destructive and self-destructive aspects of human nature, and of our apparently unlimited capacity for self-aggrandizement, self-deception, rationalization, illusion, and denial. Moreover, it recognizes our common human tendency to socialize ourselves in self-deception and denial, particularly in the face of traumatic truth or difficult choices.

Our human proclivity to self-deception and denial should be acknowledged as an important factor in all our efforts to measure and evaluate the actual dimensions of the ecological crisis. We know in advance that we are subject to all sorts of forces beyond ourselves-economic, political, military, educational, and religious-that will tempt us to minimize the threat to the planet in order to preserve the status quo. Ecological realism requires that we include within "scientific" equations our tendency to deceive ourselves and the direct correlation between such self-deception and (unenlightened) self-interest.

Even the ecological guardians will have to be carefully watched, for self-interest and illusion inevitably affect their calculations, too. Some observers describe certain major American ecological organizations as currently suffering, like the nation itself, from dysfunctional growth. "The organizations' popularity, which took off during the Reagan years, brought a huge influx of members and donations, saddling the groups with gargantuan overheads and staffs. They have become so big, so top-heavy, that to keep the apparatus running, they have in many ways become like the institutions they battle."²⁶

The ecological realism of this doctrine is most relevant, perhaps, in its teaching that, despite all the obvious evidence to the contrary, the human race is bound together in a certain inescapable unity and solidarity. It is a "terrifying thought," as Alice Walker notes, that the earth "holds us responsible for our crimes against it, not as individuals, but as a species." This is terrifying for a host of reasons, of which the most pressing is this: We know how difficult a challenge it will be to work toward and achieve species solidarity in relating responsibly to the environment.

Yet this is what it will take if we are to function effectively as co-creators. Changing individual hearts will not be sufficient; new spiritualities will not be sufficient, nor will changes on the part of only some nations and peoples. Ecological realism requires that we find new and powerful ways to socialize the human race itself toward "justice/love" for the environment, toward acceptance of our responsibility as fellow creatures who must also be stewards of the planet.

²⁶ "Audubon's Empty Nest," *Newsweek* (June 24, 1991), p. 57.



Realistically, we cannot possibly save the planet from ourselves unless we stop socializing ourselves, economically, politically, and religiously, toward its destruction, and begin socializing ourselves toward its nurture and celebration.

We are proven experts at socializing ourselves in the service of death, even at constructing efficient "death camps." The doctrine of original sin has profound relevance, surely, as we humans ponder the question now posed within the council of all beings: Why do you find it so difficult to socialize yourselves for life?