

The Matter of Faith

(This article is an abridged version of a short talk given at the Surozh Diocesan Assembly, November 1997.)

The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way.... As a man is, so he sees. William Blake

Certain names haunt our memories of the last half century: Chernobyl, Exxon Valdez, Seveso, Bhopal. It is a litany of disasters. The relentless degradation of the earth of which these tragedies are a by-product is on a scale that beggars imagination, for it is global and has a range of causes. There are some who argue that 'prophets of doom' are mistaken and that, anyway, a price must be paid for a general rise in the standard of living. To the one-fifth of the human race who remain in total poverty or to the one-third of the world's children who are under-nourished or to the twenty-five million 'environmental refugees', this view must seem totally and cruelly cynical.

We do not need to search far for signs of what is happening; no further than over a garden wall in North Norfolk. There, on a twenty-acre field, wheat, potatoes and sugar-beet are grown in rotation. No farmer's foot now needs to touch the soil in this process (unless to examine a faulty machine), and regular spreading of fertilisers and frequent sprayings of herbicides and pesticides ensure what is known as 'efficient production'. To travel in the cab of one of the 36,000 tractors that make this modern agriculture possible is to enter a world of state-of-the-art technology. The driver sits comfortably six feet above the ground in a glass-enclosed, air-conditioned cab where all the controls are computer-operated. At the touch of a button the huge wheels surge forward with immense power, drawing plough and harrow (and sometimes seeder also) in repeated trawlings of the field. Work that might in the past have involved a number of labourers throughout a period of weeks is completed in a day or two by one man. But at what cost?

For the huge tractors compact the ground and leave a hard pan below the plough depth which damages natural drainage and leaves the top-soil vulnerable to erosion. This soil is itself lightened by the chemical fertilisers, and lacks the life and body provided by natural manures. It has become a dead entity, useful for keeping the plants upright but no longer a rich source of fertility, nor a home to birds and insects that live in balance with the plants. Moreover, with the advent of monocultures and huge fields that suit the big machines, the landscape has been shattered and the symbiosis between man and nature destroyed. In the process we are denaturing the foot or two of top-soil, that place of subtle and delicate relationships between plants and their surroundings, on which our very lives depend.

It is not surprising that the resulting crops are tasteless despite their spotless appearance in the shops. And this apparent cleanliness hides further problems; one-third of all supermarket fruit and vegetables show residues of pesticides (a figure that has not changed in the last ten years despite public unease); even the Ministry of Agriculture advises topping and tailing and peeling of carrots before use. In Italy consumers are warned that the spray used on potatoes to prevent them sprouting is poisonous and that they should be peeled; in this country we are spared that warning! Nor are we told that apples treated with Alar to make them look particularly delicious hide a poison that is more than skin-deep. The serpent does seem to have thoroughly beguiled us, by using the formidable armoury of modern technological development and the persuasive power of a belief in the infallibility of science.

How far we have been deceived is becoming increasingly evident. Not only are we degrading the very earth that feeds us, but also the air we breathe and the water we drink. In the UK we have spent one billion pounds on removing nitrates from our drinking water, and are committed to paying \$100 million annually to keep this threat at bay, while we continue to douse the earth with fertilisers. We pollute our seas by dumping into them raw sewage, toxic waste and effluent from nuclear power stations, with the result, for example, that in the North Sea more than a third of the fish caught exhibit cancerous growths. We pollute the air to such an extent that in our cities one child in three suffers a respiratory problem. The so-called 'greenhouse effect' is now generally accepted to be causing climate change with the possibility of dramatic flooding of low-lying areas in this country and throughout the world. Globally we continue to cut down forests at the yearly rate of an area the size of Australia, although we know that by so doing we are destroying the planet's lungs. We have been forced by tragic accidents to realise the dangers inherent in the use of nuclear power, and have made no progress in solving the problem of safe storage of medium- and high-level waste, a problem which will remain with us for generations. As the ozone layer suffers further depletion, food chains essential to life throughout the planet may be seriously affected. And now, in an ecstasy of scientific arrogance, we are planning to grow genetically modified crops which will interact with the environment in as yet wholly unpredictable but possibly disastrous ways. Truly, we know not what we do!

What lies behind this environmental crisis? The western world has chosen, since World War II, an economic and political model which has become dominant globally and which seems to have brought about general rise in living standards. 'Seems' is the operative word; for even in the UK this particular capitalistic model has resulted in a widening gap between rich and poor, much social disintegration and a rise in crime. World-wide, the so-called 'trickle-down' theory can now be seen to have failed; 85% of world income currently goes to the richest 20%, and trade is being concentrated in the grasp of transnational corporations, the ten largest of which have a gross income greater than the GNP of 100 of the world's poorest nations. The degradation of the environment is, perhaps, the most dramatic evidence of the failure of this Western consumer model. We have been grabbed by the utopian message of ever-growing prosperity and, in business terms, of huge profits, expanding markets, and endless resources. Rapid developments in technology have given us the feeling that quick fixes are possible. We have come to see our environment as something out there, outside us, to be fought, to be dominated. And the more detached we become from nature, insulated from her delicate rhythms by our technology, the easier it is to exploit her.

The first chapter of Genesis introduces us firmly to this 'fallen' consumer world: it leads directly to death. From the moment of the Fall we know, in St Paul's words, 'that the whole creation has been groaning in travail until now'. For we have failed in our role as stewards of God's creation. We have refused to recognise that whatever dominion over nature we have been granted is to be exercised by us as beings made in the image of God. Our life is to be lived in free and loving thankfulness, offering back to God what He gives. Our very nourishment should be an act of communion with Him. For this is the God who in a free act of love ascended 'the Cross to deliver from the bondage of the enemy those whom [He has] fashioned...'. As we look at what we are doing to God's world, we may well cry with St Paul, 'Who will deliver me from this body of death?' But we know that Christ-God alone can do this. And in order that He may use us for His purposes, we must begin by repenting; for ours is this 'dominant civilisation', ours is the consumer culture that condemns millions to poverty and lays waste the Earth. And if we truly repent, we shall not be tempted to despair.

As we turn to deciding what to do, we find that there is a body of opinion and action, world-wide, massing against the consumer evil, and we need to start by informing ourselves about this and relating to it. We can begin very close to home. Under the general

inspiration of the Ecumenical Patriarch, Syndesmos has produced a resource book entitled *Orthodoxy and Ecology*, an outstandingly full survey of the theological background, backed up by reports on current projects and many suggestions for individual action. Comprehensive though this is, and immensely encouraging to see how deeply our Church is involved in these issues, we Orthodox cannot afford to be exclusive. Organisations such as Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and the Soil Association, all funded voluntarily but engaged in reputable research and responsible action, publish magazines and newsletters which can keep us informed and help each of us to choose where to make our radical commitment - for example, whether to change to a bank with an explicit ethical policy, to grow our own vegetables and/or buy organic produce, or to leave the car in the garage in favour of the bike! Just by joining these organisations we are already making a move. We are all compromised, but we can go on to make decisions that help us to be less a part of the problem and more a part of the solution.

We could well take these words of St John of Damascus as our inspiration: 'I shall not cease reverencing matter by means of which my salvation has been achieved'.

Deacon Patrick Radley

Bibliography

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Orthodoxy and Ecology: Resource Book (Syndesmos 1996) (available from The Cathedral Bookshop, 67 Ennismore Gardens, London SW7 1NH)

Useful Addresses

Friends of the Earth, 26-28 Underwood Street, London N1 7JQ (0171-490-1555)

Greenpeace, Canonbury Villas, London N1 2PN (0171-865-8180)

The Soil Association, Bristol House, 40-56 Victoria Street, Bristol BS1 6BY (0117-929-0661)