

JACQUES ELLUL

## CHRISTIAN RESPONSIBILITY FOR NATURE AND FREEDOM

*Editorial note* This is a condensed response to a debate that goes back at least to Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904) — and probably to St Augustine's *The City of God* (begun 413). In its typically modern form, the issue concerns the extent to which Christianity has exercised a formative influence on Western economic and technological development. Most recently, the work of the American historian Lynn White, Jr. (see especially his "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" [1967] and *Medieval Religion and Technology* [1978]), and broadsides by the German philosopher Carl Amery (see *Das Ende der Vorsehung* [1972], translated into French as *Fin de la providence* [1976]) have raised the issue anew. Christianity has been accused, in White's words, of bearing "a huge burden of guilt" for the conquest of nature and, as Amery and others have implied, of responsibility for creating a decadent, individualistic social culture. (For a good brief discussion of these works from a non-Christian, a Christian, and a Jewish perspective see the "Symposium on Religion and the Rise of Technology," *Research in Philosophy and Technology*, vol. 6 [1983], pp. 175-204.) Ellul, incorporating elements of such charges, provides a succinct response that summarizes his own reading of Christian history, and his "ethics of freedom." The article appeared in *Combat Nature*, whole no. 54 (Jan.-Feb. 1983), pp. 16-17.

It is common today to blame Christianity for contributing to the deterioration of nature and the rise of the centralized authoritarian state. Although the argument is often oversimplified and exaggerated, it contains an element of truth which can be summarized as follows: Christianity has played with fire and gotten burned.

The scenario can be quickly sketched. The preaching of Jesus (following Moses and the prophets) proclaimed a total liberation of humanity from powers, legal systems, social morality, religion. As a result Christianity (I mean the real thing practiced by the first Christian generations)

freed people from prevailing religions — on the condition that, from the beginning, it was not and would not itself become another religion. It destroyed the traditional sacredness attached to things and to nature. Then it proclaimed the complete and free mastery of humanity over the environment, over the world, in which human beings seem to belong in total control. God emancipated humanity. And this fact was all the more remarkable in that this unknowable, ungraspable God is also absolutely transcendent. Finally, Christianity individualized in the extreme: the value of the individual was raised above that of any social group. What counts in Christian preaching is the “thou” separated from the crowd, from the masses.

This nevertheless created an unlivable situation. For every point mentioned so far, the Christian message contains a counterpoint. People are freed from everything, yes, but this freedom is inconceivable without a conversion to God and a life within the love of God and neighbor. People become individuals, yes, but this change is viable only if together with others they form a new community, of a different type, set up in another manner than in the past and able to replace all others: the church. We receive unlimited control over the world which is no longer sacred, yes, but on condition that this world is understood as the creation of God. The sacred is no longer *within* the world, but the world, being the work of God, the gift of God, should be totally and perfectly respected. Yes, but as I have already said, this God is transcendent — in saying which, we must not forget that he is incarnated in Jesus, so that we have the image of God on earth. He is as close (and even more so) as the gods of other religions.

#### *From Institution to Oppression*

In this way Jesus’ preaching destroyed the *whole* ancient order, but reconstructed a new order. His followers were not thrown into the void, the desert, the “what-ever-you-want.” They were given new roots in religion as well as in morality, politics, and an attitude toward nature. But these roots, which should have allowed the reconstruction of a world based on liberty and love, did not take hold. And it is here that everything went haywire.

People profited from the message of Jesus without accepting all the consequences, without submitting to the orientation of creation in a new world of new obligations and indications. They were liberated from everything, and at the same time called to build a new society, a new morality (of love and liberty), and to establish a relationship of respect in which the interests of other people and things would come before their own. And always they were to make known the presence of God, a God both absolutely transcendent and, in Jesus Christ, absolutely present.

Yet the drama that has taken place has been one of destruction without a corresponding construction.

The world which was reconstructed found itself with an authoritarian state, the preaching of Jesus changed into a religion, the church made into an oppressive religious society, and the individual on his own except for external social controls. With regard to nature, people came to consider themselves absolute masters. This was the failure. Social institutions outweighed grace at the time when the seeds of anarchic freedom, unrestrained individualism, amorality, and exploitation were sown.

When the barriers erected by faith and by the primitive church were eventually destroyed by the weakening of spirituality, by the institutionalization of the church, the implications of Christianity became visible and effective. Thus it is true that Christianity has played a historical role in contributing to the deterioration of nature and the rise of the authoritarian state, but only to the extent that it has lived through the destructive aspects of Jesus' preaching and that, with few exceptions, the new person, the new world, and new relationships failed to be born. Now, in our present situation with regard to nature and freedom, Christianity has an even greater part to play. It is not at all a question of going back to the Middle Ages, to Christian domination in a "Christian" society. Such an idea is ridiculous. What is needed is an authentic re-thinking of the biblical message to see how it can be inserted into the contradictions and dialectic which now obtain between nature and freedom. In this regard I would like to suggest three simple lessons.

#### *Stewardship and Love of Nature*

The first concerns the idea of management or stewardship. Since nature is no longer sacred, man is taken to be the lord of nature. But the essential thing has been forgotten: This nature is the creation of God, who handed it over to Adam and Eve — not to do with as they pleased, but to manage and care for in the name of God.

What does this mean? From the perspective of the Hebrew Scriptures it means two things. It means that God does not want to rule over his creation directly; he does not want creation to be an object that runs exactly the way he sets it up like some automatic mechanism. God places people in nature precisely so that everything will not be submitted mechanically to some over-riding power, but in order to introduce the element of freedom, a will other than his own. God places an intermediary between himself and his creation in order "to give room to play." This in turn means that humanity (in the image and likeness of God) is called to act toward creation in the same way God does, although without his total power. And this God is given the name love. If God created, it is through love; if he gives independence to creation, it is through love. We must treat nature in the same way, managing it not for blind and

egotistical profit, but through love. Such are the implications of the first chapters of Genesis.

With this understanding we are a long way from any interpretation implying some absolute human control. For the manager or steward clearly has to account for his stewardship. The same idea returns over and over again in the teachings of Jesus. Human beings are accountable; they must answer to someone. And even if we do not accept biblical faith, this point should be retained: human beings manage the world for someone else — whether it be the rest of humanity or future generations. We live today at a time when this responsibility has burst forth into full view, and we are now in danger of being judged by the consequences of our actions.

#### *Accepting Finitude in All Things*

The second lesson I would draw from the Bible is as follows. Human beings appear to be limited from three points of view. They are subject to finitude, thresholds, and boundaries.

Finitude refers to the fact that we and the world in which we find ourselves have a *finis*. There is a limited amount of time in which we are born and die. Growth is finite. Resources are finite. Space is finite. This is the way life is, and we cannot do anything about it. From beginning to end the Bible gives us this teaching and requires us to accept living under such conditions. Each time we try to escape, a catastrophe results. Finitude is a strict limitation on our freedom. It makes us participate in the necessity of nature.

Furthermore, there are “thresholds” (as illuminated by Ivan Illich), i.e. points at which some tendency is reversed, where the increase in something produces an effect contrary to what was expected — as when an excess of medication produces a new illness. We have here an “automatic” reaction which is another limit on our freedom. The Bible likewise provides plenty of examples to warn that we must be careful to keep our actions from going beyond such thresholds.

Finally, there are “boundaries” with regard to the possibilities of human freedom. Limits or boundaries are the ultimate expression of human freedom, which chooses not to do what can be done. After all, when “Thou shall not kill” becomes a boundary to human action, then true humanity becomes possible. Certain actions are possible, but for reasons that are self-chosen and self-imposed, we freely decide not to exercise these actions. It is at this point that we are truly free, and not when we extend our actions, our power, or our strength indefinitely. In other words, when we establish either a law, a morality, or a rule of conduct and set ourselves some path, it does not matter which. Only then does there arise a responsibility for management or stewardship; with the nature we have been given we can do many things, so that we must

place boundaries on ourselves in order not to risk everything. The Bible is an expression of this kind of choice.

*Beyond Non-violence*

This brings us to a third element. I have just discussed the example of voluntarily limited power. This is precisely the example of Jesus, who always chose non-power (which goes much further than non-violence). If there is an "imitation of Christ" it can only be along these lines. The choice for non-power, however, calls into question our manner of dealing with nature, animals, and other people, the foundations and patterns of our military and technicized society, and finally our idea of freedom as autonomy, absolute independence, sovereignty, etc. The choice of non-power is also our freedom in relation to our "natural tendencies." Nature provides an example of the struggle for existence and survival of the fittest. If we play this game (as we have done), power is increased indefinitely, since we are conditioned purely and simply by necessity. Such a way of life expresses a fatality. On the contrary, in the midst of this world of fatality, we must introduce a freedom which can be expressed only in the decision for non-domination, non-violence, non-alienation from the other, and non-exploitation (whether of the natural environment or other human beings).

I think these three lessons sum up the whole biblical message. The catastrophe has been that Christians have rejected such a way of life. They have profited from autonomy without assuming responsibility, respect, non-power, expressions of love. If Christians were to return to the source of the biblical message and recover these basic givens, then they would provide stronger reasons than ever before for ecology and, at the same time, with the conviction that this is the teaching of God, they would introduce into the ecology movement the courage and hope necessary to sustain this difficult enterprise.

*Translated by* KATHARINE TEMPLE and CARL MITCHAM