PHONE 911 TO RESCUE THE PLANET!

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Craigville course "Keepers of God's Garden: Ecology and Theology"--2

If you do what I suggested, a representative of the local constabulary will think you balmy and may say "Press 4, the number for people with special problems." Well, what is the right number? Not 800. Not 900. Even if 1000 got you God, that wouldn't help: the instructions came with the garden, built into its floral & faunal genes, its soil & water & sun, all its creatures the Lord God made & then "planted a garden" for us to "till and keep," naming our fellow-inhabitants (Gn.2.8-29; in 3.17-19, the job gets tougher as a divine punishment for Adam's sin; in 1.26-28, humanity is given "dominion" [the traditional translation is preserved in NRSV] over sea-air-ground fauna, but the dominion stops short of cuisine: the passage is vegetarian).

No, prayer will not rescue the planet--unless it's the planet that's doing the praying, & the Lord God acts to rescue the planet from us. Our culture's earliest origin-stories make us responsible as responders to the God of the Garden, whom we blaspheme if we abuse prayer by using it to evade the divine call to sustainable living on & in this garden-planet.

As I said in the immediately previous Thinksheet, God takes 500 years to create soil we can destroy (by erosion & exhaustion) in a decade or two. An ancient Hebrew prayer Jesus knew honors indirectly the soil: "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, who causeth the food to spring forth from the ground...." The **ground-food-life** cycle is the simplest definition of sustainability. In Haiti, not enough good ground is left to sustain the population, & that ecological reality permanently destabilizes politics. Break into the cycle, as is happening at an alarming rate of increase globally, & humane politics becomes impossible, anarchy ensues, & human beings begin to die off en masse. This mass dying off may be, to use a secular phrase, "nature's way" of protecting the biosphere against quality-decline, but it is morally unacceptable unless it's in the serenity prayer's category of "what cannot be changed." But as long as we believe there are interventions we can effect short of Gaia's homeostatic action against our species, "serenity," especially when achieved through prayer, is blasphemy.

Effective interventions, however, will be painful. They will cut across old ways with their taboos, in the name of new ways informed by eco-necessity. Since religion is the deepest level of the old ways, we cannot avoid attacking religion. But how can I do that? By conviction & profession, I am a life-long man of religion! And my friends are religious: will I lose my friends? Will you lose yours? Or can we speak-listen-organize-vote-act our way peaceably into a sustainable way of living in the world?

1 Much of what Ernest Becker says in THE DENIAL OF DEATH can be applied to many who deride us eco-gloom-&-doomers. Currently, the most familiar form **eco-denial** takes is this: Technologically, we can keep food production ahead of baby production. When I remarked this to an agribusiness executive, he smiled wryly and said, "True, but the greater problem is at the other end of the alimentary canal. For that, there's no solution in sight."

2 For my next point, stay with this Thinksheet title's analogy. Suppose there were a number the eco-worried could phone to calm their fears, a number calling up a calming voice with the canned message translating simply as "Not to worry." In §1 I mentioned one of those fear-quieting answers: humanity has the technology to keep food-production ahead of mouth-production. That truth is dangerous because (1) it diverts attention away from the anal problem (viz, excreta deterioration of land & water despite processing) & (2) it misplaces blame from excessive fertility to maldistribution.

3 Yes, the maldistribution is itself one of those false fear-calmers. "If only the rich would share with the poor...." "If only the rich Northern countries would share with the poor Southern countries...." That's calculated to make the rich & the global North feel bad, guilty. But closer examination reveals that this middle

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axiom-by-implication (viz, between the ethical norm of benevolence & specific means of distribution), when taken as a call to action rather than just a plain fact, (1) assumes that the rich can be motivated by an adequate surge of altruism augmented by fears, and (2) would require, in world economy, not just a global restructuring but a reconceptualization of how goods move & services are provided. We can pray, dream, & work toward a third way between laissez faire (which tends to enslavement by money) & socialism (which tends to enslavement by government)--between & beyond the two ways whose dismal histories confirm my belief in original sin (viz, something more than faulty socioeconomic development is amiss). We can, & should, so pray-dream-work, knowing that even an inchoate model of what should be will help us act more intelligently-humanely than, in the absence thereof, mere pragmatism would effect.

* I did not capitalize "him."

4 In addition to the truth in the title of this letter* to the editor, population control aids quality of *the environment*: both are mentioned in ¶2, but the editor chose to pick up on only the first. When we parse the mega-problem of pollution-depletion, we see **four realities**: We human beings are

(1) a part of (integral with) nature
(2) apart from (our wills transcendent over) nature
(3) a species (collective, "humanity")
(4) individuals ("people" distributively)

In most discourse, private & public, on "the environment," these four factors function confusingly. Analyzing such discourse should (1) document the confusion(s) & (2) use the configuration of the factors to categorize.

5 Two illustrations of "factor #4 dominant" discourse:

....an antisuicide essay (28 June 93 NW 8) holds "sacred and true" "that the preservation of human life [under any & all conditions] is the highest moral ideal." After proclaiming a notion that seems to me untrue & antisacred, the writer immediately contradicts his individualism by recommending government interference against suicide! Specifically, he's badmouthing a poor old woman who was a physical multiple mess at 76. She'd written a loving note to friends--including him!--about "my final passage." How did he take it? He, & he says also her other friends, were so much under the control of the suicide taboo that he could write this: "We all feel abused by her passing--and betrayed." Betrayed, indeed. She by him.

....U.S./U.N. Permanent Rep. M.K.Albright says, "The continued withholding of vital funds from the U.N. Population Fund can lead to population growth of such profound magnitude in the coming decades that all other efforts--at home and abroad--to achieve economic prosperity would be utterly futile" (May-June/92 POPULATION). Yet our government continues to condemn China & to "insist on the right of couples and individuals to determine freely the size of their families" (Ambass. Warren Zimmermann, *ibid.*)!

Population control aids quality of life

Being both pro-choice and pro-earth, I am distressed at the anti-choice ("pro-life") forces' facile use of God to support their unbiblical and irrational position, which is that there should be no "unnatural" interference with conception or birth – i.e., no mechanical or chemical contraception, and no abortion.

The Bible says our species should actively participate in eco-management (e.g., Genesis 2:4-15). Yet you've published letters appealing to "the sovereignty of God" against contraception and abortion, two actions in which humanity works with God in the interest of the quality of human life and of the environment.

In Brazil, a country whose dominant religion opposes both contraception and abortion, 12 million abandoned children roam the streets and are routinely murdered wherever their presence interferes with the normal business of life.

It's blasphemous to speak passively of the sovereignty in the teeth of this massive human anguish and chaos.

In his Dec. 11 letter, Leo Coveney insults reason in saying that "the creator of the universe will in his own good time take good care of the humans that he has created without the assistance of" those human beings who worry about population control and favor both contraception and abortion.

Coveney's theology of passivity explains the existence of those 12 million miserable children whom Coveney's "creator" is not taking good care of.

To say that Brazil, or the world, should take care of those children is empty moralistic preaching in face of the fact that the greater the population pressure, the less the compassion available to relieve the tragedy.

Rather, we honor God when we work responsibly together with Him toward a sustainable world, using all the resources of knowledge and nature to improve the quality of human life.

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