

A THEOLOGY OF GARBAGE

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Prologue

An Invitation to a Journey¹

I invite you to go with me on a journey into the natural world as we know and learn about it today. For me this world includes both human and non-human history. In this world God is interacting with all of creation and history. We seek to observe this interaction through the eyes of faith as expressed in our Christian tradition. In this world we hope our thinking and doing can make a difference.

This is a theological journey in which we study the "science of God," we listen to the "words of the gods" (the root meaning of the word "theology")², and we celebrate the God who is expressed in the history of salvation and in the history of the natural world.

Why such a journey? The answer is two-fold. First, the ministry in which this resource is used is the out-of-doors, and, I believe, it is essential that we take this setting seriously as a laboratory for faith development. Second, I would hope this journey can be a contribution to the content and methods of the Church's educational and outdoor ministries.

This journey is through the process of how I do theology. How I think and what I write are borne from and have certain constructs because of my experiences.

I have entitled my personal theological development "The Trail of Two Conversions." I was captured by two major events in my life. The first is when in my teens I became aware of the meaning of my baptism as incorporation into the saving act of Christ in His death and resurrection (See Romans 6:1-11). As I pondered this over the years I realized how God is One who acts on God's own initiative for the well-being of all creation.

The second event is when my eyes were opened to the natural world when I discovered the prairie environment at Lutheran Outdoor Ministries Center in the late 1970's. I became excited about how the natural world functions, wished to learn more and wanted to share that information.³

As these two experiences⁴ converged a trail emerged. It has taken me down many exciting paths. With Bible in one hand and a book on ecology or plant identification in the other (and sometimes with a knowledgeable friend) I saunter and discover what is at my feet. As insights and discoveries have occurred upon this path I have sought to share them with others hoping to nurture their understanding of the Christian tradition, to develop more dimensions of their faith and knowledge of God, and to broaden their sense of love of and responsibility for all the created order. I want people to develop theologically and be excited about God, God's world, God's Word, and God's work.

I understand theology in two ways. First, it is the science of God. One seeks to gather an understanding of God as God is understood by people. Theology is what people say about god(s) or God as they try to eke out meaning in life. Theology studies how God or the gods act(s) and people respond.

Theology is not exclusively a Judaeo-Christian enterprise nor is it something that belongs solely to religious systems that claim to be revealed by God. Civilizations

have sought to develop meaning in their existence. People think. They respond to outside stimuli. They reach beyond what can be sensed. They interpret reality and draw conclusions. Thus, natural religious systems emerge with their theology, too.⁵

Joseph Sittler describes theology as the proposals that emerge from the relation between the community of faith and the historical and natural experiences of humanity.⁶ This is how I define theology in the broad sense, too. There is a dialogue between the concrete world and the teachings of the Christian faith that produce understanding and impact behavior. Theology in this sense is the study of the intersecting of the divine, human, and non-human systems.

Secondly, in a narrower scope, theology is the way individuals and religious systems define God or the god(s). God is defined as that which a person puts first in one's life. Everyone has a god in one form or another. In this case the god can be singular or plural. There can be a hierarchy. The self or a nation can be a god. Greed and pleasure are options. It is what one claims as authority in one's life.

Luther said, "Whatever then thy heart clings to . . . and relies upon, that is properly thy god."⁷

H. Richard Niebuhr makes this point when he says,

Man as a practical, living being never exists without a god or gods; some things there are to which he must cling as the sources and goals of his activity, the centers of value. As a rule men are polytheists, referring now to this and now to that valued being as the source of life's meaning. Sometimes they live for Jesus' God, sometime for country and sometimes for Yale.⁸

To summarize: theology deals both with the intersecting of the actions of God and all of creation and what is said specifically about God.

My theology has one over-arching premise. I believe that the God whom we acknowledge in the salvation history of our Christian tradition is the same God who works in human and non-human history. God does not act one way within the context of the faith story and then do things differently in the rest of life. God is most clearly understood, as far as I am concerned, in the biblical report and most specifically in Jesus Christ and the cross. How God acts to make righteous⁹ a sinful humanity is also how God acts to make righteous all of creation.¹⁰

There are three signs to look for on this journey: what I consider to be the given, how I look at the given, and what I say about the given.

The "given" is the first sign.¹¹ Where do I start my theologizing? I begin with the concrete world as it is perceived through all of our senses and interpretation. This concrete world is the world of organisms and their interaction. The interpreters are scientists and historians, professionals and amateurs, people of faith and people with no faith.

I realize that any interpretation of reality is subject to debate because there are points of view and power struggles in the various systems and disciplines that can filter data. We need to be cautious about interpretations upon which we rely. In fact, caution must be practiced with our own perceptions. In spite of these warnings we must pursue with diligence the task of being well-informed, knowing the various points of view, and possibly doing some of our own research.

I have narrowed down the concrete world I explore to the natural world and most

specifically to the discipline of ecology, the study of both the interaction between organisms in the non-human world, the interaction of the human with the non-human world, and the interaction between humans.

The way I filter or deal with this information is the second sign.¹² What concepts and biases do I employ to look at the concrete world? I use the Christian tradition, or more precisely, my understanding of the Christian tradition.

Do not let it shock you that I claim "my" understanding. I do not say this with arrogance, but with humility. I believe that each of us has our own understanding of our experiences. First, it is only natural. We perceive things differently. There are many instances where we agree in our interpretation of reality with others, but each of us "see" for ourselves. Second, it is important to have our own perception because then we own it. It is ours. We have thought it through, and questioned it, shaped it, and organized it. Third, this process is dynamic and is never finalized. Therefore, our interpretations alter through the years, shaped by our experiences.

To say that my norm is the Christian tradition is much too immense. There is a core, and this core is the cross of Christ as we know the cross in both the crucifixion and the resurrection.

I believe that the turning point in all of history is the Christ event. Here Christ ultimately becomes known. What is said about Him in Scripture is a result of this occurrence. It is in this moment in history that God makes God's self known. God has entered human history and become powerless, submitting to the system of the sinful world, yet revealing power which is only from God. This is how I understand the meaning of Paul's words to the Philippians:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
 who, though he was in the form of God,
 did not regard equality with God
 as something to be exploited,
 but emptied himself,
 taking the form of a slave,
 being born in human likeness.
 And being found in human form,
 he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the point of death -
 even death on the cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
 and gave him the name
 that is above every name,
 so that at the name of Jesus
 every knee should bend,
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth
 and every tongue should confess
 that Jesus Christ is Lord,
 to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:5-11 NRSV

This becomes the starting point for understanding who God is in history and who God is in creation. From here our understanding and theology can develop.

What is enlightening and exciting for me is when the disciplines of the environmental studies and theological studies converge, interact with each other, and contribute to each other's meaning.

There is a third sign. One could call it general application, but I feel it must be

more specific. It is what is said about the given. As we reflect on the interaction of ecology and the Christian tradition there are learnings that emerge that give us insight into each of these disciplines as well as application in how to live concretely in a real, pluralistic world of human encounter, a world that is multi-cultural, multi-racial, and multi-gender.

This application is not incidental nor accidental. The setting in which outdoor ministries takes places is also a mixing of many people. This intergrouping of persons must be taken into account in any activity or learning process. People must respect and cooperate with each other for the sake of life together. These may also be experiences that can be taken home and applied. Ironically, outdoor ministries may be one of the only agencies of the Church where such human interaction is natural and possible.

It is my contention that the Church must prepare her people to live within a pluralistic society. We (author and reader) are no longer the "only kids on the block." Racial prejudice is no longer limited to a black/white issue. Religious prejudice is more than Jewish-Christian. The religious and cultural pluralism in our society is a given. The first thing Christians must learn is how to live responsively, responsibly, and comfortably within it, if for no other reason, than to make a contribution to harmony within the human/political/world-wide community.

To accomplish this:

1. A method of dialogue from which harmony ensues must be developed and guidelines established to allow and encourage openness of people of various religious and cultural traditions to communicate, and
2. The Christian must enter into the conversation -
 - a. Confident of the Christian tradition and one's own understanding of it,
 - b. Willing to benefit from and be beneficial to other religious and cultural traditions for the deepening and enhancing of each, and
 - c. Able to throw off the mantle of exclusiveness and be trustingly inclusive.

Second, I have arrived at a new understanding of the necessity for diversity. It is my firm belief from an ecological perspective that diversity in the natural world is the most important resource the world possess. Environmental action and concerns need to focus on preserving diversity and allowing speciation¹⁵ to occur at its natural rate.

If diversity is a resource in the natural world, is it not also a resource in the human world? The answer for me is "yes."

Third, my acknowledgement of pluralism in culture and religion makes me interpret it as a blessing rather than a bane. The pluralistic situation is a necessity. In ecological studies one learns that when an ecosystem is simplified through technological skills we put it into great jeopardy. The fact is that the more complex the ecological system the greater its chances for success and survival.

When tempted to reduce religious and cultural systems it seems we are jeopardizing our own social system. This could be a cause for alarm in one way or another for the Christian tradition.

Thus, in seeing pluralism as a blessing, could it also be a gift from God?

Fourth, the work of theology within the Christian tradition must recognize that:

1. Theology is for the sake of the people of God, giving instruction, guidance, foundation, organization of thought, a means of articulating the

faith, and a framework for the faith from which action can emerge.

2. We need not defend our case (apologize), but we need handles to be proactive in the conversation.
3. Theology must be done in order to help the people of God by giving a foundation for action within the context of the pluralism of the present age and not the monism of the confessional tradition. In other words, theology must be the state of the art for the sake of the state of the mind in the state of pluralism.¹⁴

Theology has a necessary function in the Christian community. It helps us to think and speak with regard to our own Christian faith and to live creatively and insightfully in a pluralistic culture.

Thus, these are the three signs along this path: the given is the concrete world as described in the discipline of ecology, the norm is the cross of Christ, and what is said about the given and the norm give us insights into both of the disciplines as well as application to the environment and culture in which we live. One could probably order these elements in a different pattern. This happens to be the way I do theology.

I found this article on "Pack Rat Historian" by Jared Diamond and feel it illustrates very simply how various disciplines interface for new learnings. It also fits the theme of this paper.

In 1849, hungry gold rush miners crossing Nevada found some glistening balls of a candy like substance on a cliff, ate the sweet-tasting balls, but then developed nausea. Eventually, scientists realized that the balls were hardened deposits made by small rodents, called pack rats, that protect themselves by building dens of sticks, food debris, plant fragments, bones, and mammal dung. The den fills with their feces and becomes saturated with their concentrated urine, which crystallizes and cements the so-called midden to a bricklike consistency. In 1961 two biologists studying the Nevada A-bomb test site for the Atomic Energy Commission found an old pack rat midden full of fragments of juniper, a plant no longer living in the midden's vicinity but likely to have been growing there thousands of years ago. When radiocarbon dating showed the middens material to be about 9,320 years old, the idea of a time machine was born.

Pack rat middens don't provide a one-hundredth-second snapshot, and they lack a sound track . . . The rats collect material within about fifty yards of their den, and the material in one midden sample is gathered over a period of a few months to a few years. The crystallized urine prevents the material from decaying. Hence the midden constitutes a locally and quickly assembled time capsule. By identifying the remains of the dozens of urine-encrusted plant species in a midden, botanists can reconstruct a snapshot of the vegetation growing near the midden at the time that it was being accumulated, while zoologists can reconstruct something of the fauna from the insect and vertebrate remains. . . Sequences of middens from the same site have yielded sequences of vegetational snapshots over as much as the past 40,000 years. . .

Middens have been a windfall to biogeographers . . . for whom the answers to many problems rest on knowing what species used to live where and when. . . middens can also help solve mysteries of human history, because knowledge of past vegetation is crucial to assessing a theory of historical causation known as environmental determinism.¹⁵

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The author proceeds to describe the potential contribution of this research to an area of study called environmental determinism, the idea that the conditions of the environment contribute very directly to where and how people live.

Notice the process set forth in this article. First, something is found and examined. Secondly, various disciplines are engaged to reflect on the finding. Third, this information opens up further avenues of investigation and examination in related disciplines.

In this article the discovery begins with a waste product and leads to a discourse on environmental determinism.

When doing theology the process is more complicated because the methods and data of study are not simple and neat to measure and test. Nonetheless, the same steps must be taken and the risks acknowledged.

Possibly the best way to capsule my method is to tell about a logo and entrance sign an artist designed for Lutheran Outdoor Ministries Center in Oregon, Illinois.

The man is a very sensitive artist. I had employed him for several years to design our promotional material. We would have fantastic dialogues as he tried to concretize in an art form the concepts and ideas I had for the summer themes.

One day my friend presented me with a mock up of an entrance sign, a butcher block piece with the wood formed in such a way that a section was left open in the shape of a cross. Next to this vacated space was the name of the Center.

This artist, whose religious posture is somewhere on a continuum between an atheist and an agnostic by his own disclosure, said, "I think this should be your sign and your logo. There are two things I want to say about this piece. First, I promised my wife that I would never put a cross on anything I designed. But the cross seems the only appropriate symbol of what you are about in this place. Second, you will note that the cross is a vacant space in the wood. My understanding is that you look at the world through the cross."¹⁶

I hope this journey has given you some insight into the way I do theology, and this sharing might help you with your spiritual journey.

Introduction

The Given is Trash

When archaeologists dig into the ruins of ancient civilizations the areas of great productivity are trash heaps. From these remains scientists can piece together how people lived, what their artistic expressions were, what technical skills they had, the way reality was perceived, the nature of their culture, and some understanding of their religious system(s).¹⁷

If garbage dumps are researched today¹⁸ as though they were ruins of a by-gone civilization what would be the findings? What would they tell about people, cultures, world views, religious systems, and values?

Two issues confront our world today: the indiscriminate use of non-renewable resources and the management of solid waste. These issues are on a continuum. What a trash heap reveals today is what we have taken from the ground, "refined" and "developed," and either returned to it or forever taken from it. Some things can reenter the natural cycle and others will either take a long time to return or never

will.¹⁹

There are two simple questions being asked under this theme:

1. What does our garbage and our treatment of it tell about the god(s) or God in whom we believe (the theology that would emerge from a study of garbage)?

2. As Christian people what does our faith in God have to do with our treatment of trash (the attitude toward and the treatment of garbage that emerges from our theology)?

The first question addresses theology as defined earlier as a study of what people hold as their God or gods. This presupposes that all cultures have some type of theological system whether they claim being religious or not. There are those things which the people hold dear, hope for, and fear.

In each cultural and religious system there are:

1. the cherished; ideas, things, etc.
2. the objects of faith, what people trust, what they believe,
3. the objects of fear and anxiety,
4. attitudes about the meaning of time and space, here and hereafter,
5. an understanding of what keeps and makes a culture healthy and whole physically and emotionally, i.e. what is salvific,
6. an attitude and feeling about the future,
7. what is sacred and what is profane,
8. an understanding of how to treat the resources of the earth and what they represent,
9. cultic celebrations and myths,
10. a definition of what it means to be human,
11. an understanding of what contributes to or is sin and evil, or negative,
12. an interpretation of what science means,
13. a view of the world, and
14. the things that are viewed as necessities for life.

As the cultures define themselves and act on their self-understanding they interact with the natural world. How do they understand it? How do they treat it?

In the second question theology is the intersecting of our understanding of the Christian faith and our experiences. It is assumed that our theology influences our behavior, however, the situation can be vice versa. Unfortunately, the latter might be true. We think this is what we believe, but our actions speak louder than words.

Our attention is focused on garbage in this particular resource. We will explore what it is, how it is a part of the nutrient cycle, what happens when resources are removed from that cycle and become a part of the waste stream, actions that should be taken to live within a balance of the cycle and the stream, and how we should celebrate what we call "trash."

A Crash Trash Course

A variety of words are used for garbage: trash, refuse, waste, junk. The word comes from Middle English where it means "entrails of fowls." Garbage runs the spectrum of material naturally created that passes through an organism's system and is disposed of to perform a useful function for another organism at the one end to material that passes through an industrial system and when disposed of contributes to the destruction of the environment at the other end.²⁰

In an article, "The History of Garbage," garbologist William L. Rathje expresses it dramatically:

Garbage is not mathematics. To understand garbage you have to touch it, feel it, sort it, smell it. You have to pick through hundreds of tons of it, counting and weighing all the daily newspapers, the telephone books, the soiled diapers, the Styrofoam clamshells that briefly held hamburgers, the lipstick cylinders coated with grease, the medicine vials still encasing brightly colored pills, the empty bottles of scotch, the cans of paint and turpentine, the forsaken toys, the cigarette butts. You have to count and weigh all the organic matter, the discards from thousands of plates: the noodles and the Cheerios and the tortillas; the hardened jelly doughnuts bleeding from their wounds; the pieces of pet food which have made their gravy; the half-eaten bananas, mostly still with their peels, black and incomparably sweet in the embrace of final decay. You have to confront sticky green mountains of yard waste and slippery brown hills of potato peels and brittle ossuaries of chicken bones and T-bones. And then finally there are the "fines," the vast connecting soup of indeterminable former nutrients, laced with bits of paper and metal, glass and plastic, which suffuse every landfill like a kind of lymph. The fines, too, must be gathered and weighed.²¹

Here is some information that might be helpful.

First, the human animal in the U.S. processes vast amounts of garbage; 3.5 pounds per day per person is the estimate.

Second, there is an obsession with health, sanitation, and the safety of products. The tamper-proofing, the quality and cleanliness of an item, ease and convenience, and the fast food industry, to name a few, have encouraged use of resources for "good" reasons. However, they draw on non-renewable resources and fill garbage dumps and oceans with non-biodegradable debris.

Third, no one knows what is deposited in the ocean, but we are aware of what is going into the landfills. These are reaching their limits and becoming scarce. Landfills also cannot be sanitary regardless of the technology due to the problem of seeping leachate (toxic materials that flow into the underground water system) and oozing toxic gases that contribute to the Green House effect.

Fourth, NIMBY (not in my back yard) is a slogan for many folks nowadays who refuse to have a landfill in their community.

Fifth, two alternatives to landfills are incineration and recycling. Incinerators have their opponents like the landfills. Recycling has become popular, but it requires much more support from the government as well as people becoming involved in the work intensive task of sorting everything.

The study of what people in the U.S. throw into the garbage cans and the landfills reveals some interesting things about our culture.

1. We live with abundance. We take more than we need. We have more than we need. We confuse our wants and our needs. We have a compulsion to consume.²²
2. We will pay the price for unblemished produce. We will impact our natural world with poisons to create a "perfect" piece of fruit and throw the produce in the dumpster behind the market place when it becomes "spoiled."

3. We are heavily dependent upon technology. But the messianic quality of technology has a demonic side as well. Thomas Berry says, "The immediate danger is not possible nuclear war, but actual industrial plundering."²³
4. We are unable to deal with finitude, limits upon our system. This is noticed in how we deal with natural resources as well as the population explosion.
5. Advertising and packaging are tremendous industries that contribute to products in the landfill.
6. Communication in the written form has taken over. Over 40% of the landfill is paper.
7. Products have short term use. How often does a Styrofoam cup get used before it is pitched? A second cup of coffee maybe?²⁴
8. Common space is a problem. We overuse it and treat it as a common dump. There has been little or no concern regarding social impact in the way common space is treated. What is common space? Land, water, air. Industry has probably been the greatest contributor to indiscriminate use of the earth and its resources when disposing of waste products. Industry is taking steps now to correct at least present practices.
9. A manicured environment is important to many people. Grass clippings and dead leaves fill plastic bags in landfills. For the sake of appearance we deny one type of natural cycle and create a problem where recycling is virtually impossible.
10. It appears that science exists for the benefit of technology, the welfare of the human species' medical needs, and the fulfillment of the "good life". It is just within recent history science is being directed toward the care of the earth.

What the trash heap tells garbologists about the culture is what people consider important and utilitarian. It reveals a view of the world.

A Theology from Garbage (An Etic View)

What appears to be the will of the people? What is sacred? What is profane? What type of thinking shapes their destiny? Who/what/where is their god(s)? In other words, what kind of theology emerges from the garbage heap?

If garbologists knew nothing about the content of a religious system of a culture, but asked such questions as raised earlier what would be some of their findings while studying the contents of garbage cans along curb sides and the materials in landfills? From this etic²⁵ observation here is an outline of some things that could be learned from the garbage dumps.

1. If the god of the people is what is cherished one would find a pantheon of gods who would have some fancy names that mean health, sanitation, convenience, and communication. The nature of these gods is an extension of human desire for the "good life" as it is expressed in this culture.

2. The people trust the sufficiency of resources and rely upon them to be close at hand. Technological skills are believed in. There is trust in human

ingenuity. It seems that good stewardship of the earth is expeditiously moving natural resources to the trash heap.

3. People fear destruction and contamination and are driven to solve these problems in a myopic fashion.

4. Time and space are for one's use. There are no apparent criteria for determining their value. Each individual decides on one's own.

5. Hope is grounded in a world that can supply. Comfort and convenience are other words for salvation.

6. The sacred is that which is unblemished and rid of trash. The profane is garbage, dirt, etc. The high point of the cultic celebration is the weekly visit of the dump truck to take the trash away.

7. The human being is a consumer. The relationship between the human species and other species is that the human species dominates and uses the others. This also applies to the treatment of "other" humans, those who are despised and rejected. Often they are the handlers of garbage.²⁶

8. Sin and evil are uncleanness or the inability to respond immediately to "needs". The first is obvious. "Cleanliness is next to Godliness" is still an apt saw. Instant service is something in which many new industries take pride, and in the process the solutions for handling things "quickly" have energized the development of products that have only one use and are made from materials that are not biodegradable. This results in the high demand for Styrofoam, for example. 9. Nature is to be consumed. Science is to serve technology.

10. The world view is that the use of everything is determined by the user rather than the used. Humans instruct the earth what to do. Humans do not "listen" to the earth.

A Theology from Garbage (An Emic View)

How would a garbologist interpret the theology from the garbage if the garbologist knew something about the Christian tradition? This is the emic view.²⁷ There are claims that Christianity is the prevailing religious system in the U.S. Certainly, in spite of comments to the contrary by the "non-believers," it is quite obvious that Christianity has influenced much of the behavior and thought patterns of the people of the U.S.

Lynn White, Jr., in his essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," makes the case that the American way of thinking in terms of anthropocentrism, the dualism of humanity and nature, and the transcendence of God have their source in the Christian tradition, and this type of thinking has contributed to the crisis of ecology.²⁸

Thomas Berry makes a similar accusation, but his approach is from his judgment that the emphasis of the Christian community on the subject of the salvation of the world is the source of the problem.

"Unfortunately Western religious traditions have been so occupied with redemptive healing of a flawed world that they tend to ignore creation as it is experienced in our times."²⁹

What does garbage reveal about God to someone who knows something about the

cultural/Christian system?

I am calling this a cultural/Christian tradition because often we are calling certain religious concepts Christian which are more expressions of the civil religion of our day, concepts that are parallel to natural religion. God is expressed this way:

1. Nature and God are equated. You can hear people say, "It is good to get close to nature to get close to God."³⁰
2. God is the nurturing and beautiful aspects of the created order. Few people who see nature this way comment on or even notice the brutality of nature. Garbage and waste are not even in the system.
3. God is above all things. Natural events are parables about God. But God is not directly involved.

What do we learn about the cultural/Christian tradition?

1. Though God is transcendent, God is providential. Why do we have all we possess? Look how "good" God is. This is where one finds one's faith.
2. The object of belief is interesting because it boils down to the human capacity to manipulate the earth.
3. What is feared is that evil is winning over good, and we need to put whatever is sinful and evil in its place so it will not succeed.
4. Time is finite and space is infinite.
5. Salvation is a word used for life after death for humans.
6. Hope takes two forms. One is that the "good life" is yet to come. This is the belief that the millennial age (the second coming of Christ) is immanent. The second is that the "good life" is the here and now, and we make the most of it, exploiting all the good things God provides.³¹
7. The sacred is the manicured. The profane is the dirt, and trash is to be put out of sight and avoided.
8. Stewardship is measuring and being motivated by the Gross National Product.
9. The cultic celebration is communion with God in an environment free of garbage.
10. The human being is at the center of the creative and redemptive process. However, it appears the human does not dominate successfully. This is caused by sin because according to this view people are not perfect. The providential God will make things better. It just takes time.
11. The natural world is static, fixed. It is made of natural laws. There may be some sense of evolution, but only on a limited scale.
12. Science is for enhancing the quality of human life, but not necessarily the quality of the environment.
13. The world view is that life is a stream that can result in good or ill.

A Theology for Garbage (A Revised View)

Thomas Berry and others suggest that a new story for our time is needed to give substance to a spiritual reality that will affect our behavior in relation to the environment. His story comes from listening to the earth. It is shaped by the theories of evolution and genetic development.³²

The Christian church has a new story. It is really ancient, but it is one that receives little treatment when dealing with the natural world and ecological issues. It is the story of Jesus.

It begins with Jesus Christ as the revealer of God.³³ The God who is made known is the God who restores, redeems, and reconciles.

The story of God as revealed in Christ can be seen in the story of Abraham and Isaac. God's Son is the sacrifice. In a sense He is the ram in the thicket. God is involved in the sacrificial nature of the world.

In the cross of Christ is found God's interaction with the world in acts of love and self-giving, making it possible for others to be fulfilled. The cross is the sacrifice that brings wholeness to the world. (We call this salvation.)

To say that God is revealed in Jesus Christ does not exclude God from being made known through other means, natural and human history. For the Christian Jesus Christ is the beginning point of revelation. In fact, most precisely the beginning point is the sacrifice itself, the cross.

As the one who reveals God, Jesus Christ presents God as the restorer, the healer, the hope for the weak and the disenfranchised. Jesus Christ acts by the cross to restore a broken world into community. The cross is God's act of sacrifice so that others may have life and life in abundance.³⁴

The key word is "reconciliation." It is repeated in Romans 5:6-10, II Corinthians 5:16-19, Ephesians 2:13-22, and Colossians 1:15-20. The cross is associated with God's deed in Jesus Christ to break down barriers and mend broken relationships between God and humanity and humans with each other.³⁵

As I indicated earlier it is hard for me to conceive of God as Reconciler in salvation history only and not as the Reconciler in natural history. The clue to how God acts in the natural world is how God acts in salvation history, made known in Jesus Christ.

It is interesting that the New Testament speaks of creation from the posture of the God revealed in Christ who reconciles the world. There is more to God's action in Christ than just atoning for sin. As Joseph Sittler says, there is more to grace than redemption.³⁶

In John 1:1-5, 10 Jesus is referred to as the Word through whom all is created. This report has striking similarities to the Creation Story of Genesis 1:1-2:4a. In the Genesis report the means God uses to create the world is Word. In John that Word takes on flesh, and the name of the Word is "Jesus."

In Colossians 1:15-20 Paul (probably with help from other faithful people in his day) identifies Jesus Christ as being created first, the one through whom God creates, the one in whom all is held together, and the one in whom God reconciles all things to God.³⁷ The origin of this concept is in Proverbs 8:22-31 where wisdom (the Greek name is Sophia) is the one whom God creates first and through whom all is created.

Hebrews 1:2b makes a general reference to the same notion.

As the one through whom God creates, the New Testament sees Christ as the one who holds all of creation together. This type of imagery can be that of glue (natural laws) or it can be that power that allows organisms to interact in whatever random way it happens with the constant act of restoring the system as the body is functioning.

If one notes from the presentation above, garbage must be seen from a natural history perspective as something that is vital to life. The food chain is described as production, consumption, and decomposition, the nutrient cycle. In the natural world there is no such problem as that of the disposing of some product. The waste product of one lifeform is the nourishment of another. Humans, on the other hand, are making a world of universal waste causing maximal entropy.³⁸

Garbage is a bad word in our vocabulary. But in essence it is "good." Is this not the meaning of Genesis 1:1-2:4a and I Timothy 4:4-5? Garbage is a part of the life system. When the cycle is disrupted or shut down a crisis occurs.

If one is going to operate responsibly within the natural world one needs to anticipate the whole nutrient cycle. For the human species the task of decomposition has been treated incidently or cast off for someone else to handle.

The blessings of technology have also been a bane. The successful efforts to reshape the landscape and to serve humanity has introduced materials that no longer can contribute to the natural/nutrient cycle. A waste stream has begun to flow.

In a sense garbage has been alienated from human existence. But this is not the way it is to be. Garbage is a part of reality. In Jesus Christ restoration takes place.

Thus, when presenting Jesus Christ in this mode one can refer to Him as the Re-concycler. As the Reconcycler He brings to bear God's restoring relationship with all of creation and the relationship between the human and non-human world. God and God's creation are involved together.

From this perspective we discover that garbage is a "good" in God's creation, and the waste in the nutrient cycle is affirmed.

The story of Noah is an exciting vehicle for the substance of this theology of garbage.

Chapter 1 - "What Did Noah Do about Trash?" - This sets the stage for the problems and solution.

Chapter 2 - "Who Shut the Door to the Ark?" -

- a. The ark was an ecosystem intended to preserve species and systems.
- b. God sets the species aside and shuts the door.

Chapter 3 - "It Begins again with Noah" - Noah is the new Adam, but with an orientation from the past. Noah must also deal with the sins of Adam (original sin).

Chapter 4 - "Can Water Wash away Sin?" -

- a. The intent of the flood was to rid the world of sin; however, that is not accomplished. In its stead we are reminded of the redeeming activity of God in Christ to deal with sin.

b. The process is always a process of restoration. It is continuous.

Chapter 5 - "Color the Rainbow Green" - The commitment by God to all of creation and to its restoration is found in a covenant that is symbolized by the rainbow.

As indicated in the Prologue these themes have multi-cultural, multi-racial, and multi-gender aspects to them as we focus upon our pluralistic society.

ENDNOTES

1. This is an attempt to describe my method of doing theology.
2. J. Samuel Preus, Explaining Religion (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 72.
3. These experiences are detailed in my theological position paper, "The Trail of Two Conversions."
4. I call these conversions because they are turning points, they had an emotional impact on me, and they became significant for how I would do my theology. For further information please read my theological position paper.
5. A problem that has probably been studied, and I am unaware of it, is the close identification between science and religion in ancient cultures. It seems to me that these two were very close if not one in the same. The scientific world view and the religious world view were not distinguishable at all.

This gives me pause for several reasons. One, as we study our natural world and learn more and more each day about its composition, detail, diversity, and mutualism we tend to allow information not to inform our religious point of view. The ancients possibly saw what was happening, put an interpretation on it, but allowed it to contribute to their religious understanding. What do we do today?

As we become more "advanced" and "sophisticated" the relationship between religion and science part company for a variety of reasons. New understandings and interpretations of the natural world challenge the cherished traditions of the religious community. What is being presented is contradictory to the natural science of the religious community. The religious community has a closed system.

Who drove the wedge between the two and created the cleavage? My notion and bias are that the religious community was and is the culprit.

Today, in our conversations we are seeking to restore a relationship between the two.

6. Theology is the proposal of relations between the testimony of a community of faith and the life of man in nature and in history. The clarification and authentication of both substantives - the testimony of the community and the life of man - will take place, if it does take place, in the process and according to the amplitude and depth of the congruities disclosed in those relations as actually unfolded. One does, indeed, have a starting point chronologically; but the establishment and securing of the legitimacy of that starting point accrues to it as a function of the relations deployed in following out its suggestions. The pattern is more like a symbiosis than an equation or a graph. Theology is the proposal of a symbol-counterpoint; it secures persuasiveness by two achievements: the clarification of an interior coherence among those symbols that open the depth of the testimony of faith, and by the antiphonal voices of recognition it arouses. Substantives are not nakedly proposed; terms gather substance by the amplification of their reality-as-relations. If this is not the nature of affirmation about God, man, grace, redemption, and other major loci,

then I have radically misread both Bible and Christian fact.
(Joseph Sittler, Essays on Nature and Grace (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 22.)

7. H. Richard Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941), 17.

8. Ibid., 56-57.

9. I like to define the word "righteous" as "making something good." It is a dynamic word rather than static. That means, it is not what one is, but what one is doing.

10. I realize this statement presents problems right at the beginning because there is the notion that salvation history is dependent upon a fall/redemption construct. Thus, one is prone to ask if the natural world is sinful and evil and in need of redemption. This troubles me that we have become so immersed in this notion that we cannot appreciate the idea that God is operating in history in spite of human sin. In fact, God's actions in history do not require sin as a prerequisite. I believe such thinking is shared by Matthew Fox in "Creation Spirituality."

11. The "datum."

12. This is the "norm."

13. Speciation is this natural process by which organisms become extinct and others take their place. One of the environmental problems today is that human action is speeding up the process of extinction so that replacement of species cannot keep up.

14. I resonate with William C. Placher when he says,

David Tracy offers a helpful list of some possibilities for wider interreligious dialogue: Christian can learn from Buddhists to rediscover the power of Paul's talk of "self-emptying"; Christian ideas of grace can help Pure Land Buddhists clarify their differences with other schools of Buddhism; Buddhists can learn from Christian emphases on social justice to rethink their understanding of what "compassion" means; adherents of many other traditions can learn from a neo-Confucian like Wang Yang-ming strategies for combining political and mystical elements of faith.

(William C. Placher, Unapologetic Theology, A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 142.)

15. Jared Diamond, "Pack Rat Historians," Natural History, February 1991, 24-26.

16. Just in case this story gets carried around and the name of the artist be lost in my mind, his name is Hasey Tarbox.

17. I have wondered what the relationship is between the more technologically developed cultures and the amount of debris left behind in dumps. Do the civilizations that lived more responsibly with their land have as much archaeological evidence as those with defined artistic and technological skills?

18. We would be called garbologists. How is this research carried out? First, there is the fresh refuse database. This is done at the pick up points. This includes long term study, recyclable materials study, and hazardous waste study. Second, the landfill is the second database. (William L. Rathje, "The History of Garbage, Archaeologists Bust Myths about Solid Waste and Society," Garbage, September/October 1990, 38-39.)

19. The time it takes litter to decompose:

Paper	2 to 5 months
Orange peels	6 months
Milk cartons	5 years
Filter-tip cigarette butts	10 to 12 years
Plastic bags	10 to 20 years
Leather shoes	25 to 40 years
Nylon cloth	30 to 40 years
Plastic containers	50 to 80 years
Aluminum	90 to 100 years
Plastic foam	NEVER

Also, you may remember the movie, "The Graduate." One word the industrialist had for the new graduate that meant success, money, etc. was "plastics."

20. A good example of this process is found in the dried leaves eaten by worms. What is eliminated from the worm's system contributes to the humus of the soil. At the other end of the spectrum garbage as toxic materials pollute the underground water from whence many people get their drinking water.

21. Rathje, op. cit., 32.

22. This compulsion to use, to consume, has found its ultimate expression in our own times, when the ideal is to take the natural resource from the earth and transform them by industrial processes for consumption by a society that lives on ever-heightened rates of consumption. That consumption has something sacred about it is obvious from the central position it now occupies. This is all quite clear from the relentless advertising campaigns designed to convince the society that there is neither peace nor joy, neither salvation nor paradise, except through heightened consumption.

(Thomas Berry, The Dream of the Earth (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 115.)

23. Ibid., 72.

24. The difficulty with our industrial age is that its products last for a brief period and then forever remain as a trashed and toxic world in which we and all future generations are condemned to live for an infinite period. . . Human products do not consistently renew themselves in the manner of natural forms. (Ibid., 157.)

25. "Etic" means to view something from the outside.

26. See Chapter 2 for more details on attitudes towards garbage handlers.

27. "Emic" means to look at something from within.

28. What did Christianity tell people about their relations with the environment?

While many of the world's mythologies provide stories of creation, Greco-Roman mythology was singularly incoherent in this respect. Like Aristotle, the intellectuals of the ancient West denied that the visible world had a beginning. Indeed, the idea of a beginning was impossible in the framework of their cyclical notion of time. In sharp contrast, Christianity inherited from Judaism not only a concept of time as nonrepetitive and linear but also a striking story of creation. By gradual stages a loving and all-powerful God had created light and darkness, the heavenly bodies, the earth and all its plants, animals, birds, and fishes. Finally, God had created Adam and, as an afterthought, Eve, to keep man from being lonely. Man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes. And, although man's body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God's image.

Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. As early as the second century Tertullian and Saint Irenaeus of Lyons were insisting that when God shaped Adam he was foreshadowing the image of the Incarnate Christ, the Second Adam. Man shares, in great measure, God's transcendence of nature. Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.

(Lynn White, Jr., "The Historic Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," Environmental Handbook, Edited by Garrett de Bell (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970), 20.)

29. Berry, op. cit., 25.

30. People involved in Outdoor Ministries hear this often.

31. Berry points out that the millennial vision of the book of Revelation is the "source of what might be the most powerful psychic energies ever released on the earth, psychic energies that have eventually taken extensive control over the physical functioning of the planet and are now entering into control of its biological systems." (Berry, op. cit., 28.)

32. Berry says:

Presently a new interpretation of the Western historical process seems to be indicated. Neither the liberal progressive nor the conservative traditionalist seems to fit the situation. The only suitable interpretation of Western history seems to be the ironic interpretation. This irony is best expressed, perhaps, by the observation that our supposed progress toward an ever-improving human situation is bringing us to waste world instead of wonder world." (Berry, op. cit., 17.)

33. This is neglected in many circles when dealing with the natural world. In the dualism of nature and humanity that prevails in Western thought Jesus Christ is the human God for the sake of human salvation.

34. When dealing with the theme of creation in this way the issue of natural and revealed religion can be set aside to be examined differently. The parallels of various creation stories can be drawn. The influence of natural

religion on the biblical tradition can be cited. The relationship between polytheism and monotheism in the Old Testament can be pursued. All of these factors can be delved into for what they contribute to the perception of reality. Native American traditions can be explored without challenging the heart of revelation.

By the creation event being couched in the redemptive work of God in Christ a unique position is taken. First, there is focus on a historical event. Second, creation as the revealer of God (pantheism, etc.) is not the primary means of God making the self known. It is Jesus Christ who reveals God. Third, the process of the origin of the world is not speculated upon. The context is, the engagement of humanity and God, or to put it differently, the garbage and what contributes to it and how God acts to restore it to fruitful use.

35. See Chapter 4 for greater elaboration of this theme.

36. Joseph Sittler addresses this issue when speaking about the "plentitude of the reality of grace and the broad theater of its engagement with thought and sensibility" that "has not commonly been declared with a scope appropriate either to the magnitude of the energy of grace or in sufficient precise relation to the changes in contemporary man's self-understanding." That is, there is something more to the concept of grace than a simplistic restatement of God loves, forgives, cares, and that it is made known in Jesus Christ. Sittler goes on:

. . . the doctrine of grace has been almost exclusively administered in relation to man as sinner. So to declare the reality of grace is by no means an error. If there is no grace of God for radical evil no other or ampler presentation of it can be effectual for fundamental human fact. But if grace is suggested as exhausting its meaning and redemptive force at that point alone, entire ranges of it remain unadministered. (Sittler, op. cit., 14-15.)

37. In Essays on Nature and Grace Sittler spends a great deal of time discussing this passage in the context of "cosmic Christology" (Ibid., 36-50).

38. Berry, op.cit., 157.