

Counterpoint



Read then Recycle

Environmental awareness, a religious concern

In the Oct. 17 issue of *The Record*, Dr. Ernie Diedrich and SJU Senior Mike Miner argued eloquently for the introduction of Environmental Studies into our curriculum. I concur, and I am especially glad to see this issue being addressed publicly on our campuses. I believe that there are many excellent reasons why we should adopt such a program. Perhaps the most significant reason for our institutions is because many of the solutions to our most critical ecological problems will have a religious base.

In a classic essay published in *Science* (155:1203-1207, 1967), Lynn White, Jr. argued that the roots of our ecological crisis are ultimately derived from the "Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man." He believes this attitude originated in the Christian creation story in which God created the earth for the benefit and rule of humans. Thus, it "is God's will that man could exploit nature for his proper ends."

Former President Reagan is alleged to

have said, "When you've seen one redwood tree, you've seen them all." According to White, this comment is an example of the Christian notion that "A tree can be no more than a physical fact. The whole concept of the sacred grove is alien to Christianity and to the ethos of the west. For nearly two millennia, Christian missionaries have been chopping down sacred groves, which are idolatrous because they assume spirit in nature."

Ecology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one."

In his oft-cited essay, "Tragedy of the Commons" (*Science* 162:1243-1248; 1968), biologist Garrett Hardin also asserts that there are many environmental problems, such as growth, for which there is no technical solution. The solution to these problems will require a change in human values.

The question

Should an Environmental Studies course be mandatory?

White concludes that since "The roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious. More science and more tech-

Charles Birch, the 1990 winner of the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, highlights the importance of religion in solving our ecological problems.

He says that "Expanding the concepts of compassion, rights and justice to all living creatures, not only in theory but in the practice of a biocentric ethic, would be a great achievement for our time. Yet, the advocacy of western religious thought is most weak here, where the ache of the world is most strong." Writer and philosopher Richard Means agrees that "We need to appreciate more fully the religious and moral dimensions of the relation between nature and the human spirit."

I am convinced that religion can and will play a major role in addressing ecological problems. And what better place could there be than CSB/SJU, with its strong Benedictine heritage focusing on stewardship of the land, to examine the interrelationship of religion and ecology?

Let's consider the idea of an Environmental Studies program—St. Benedict would want it that way.

Stephen Sauppe, PhD,
CSB/SJU professor of biology