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H. J. MASSINGHAM: CHRISTIAN ECOLOGIST

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As the ecology movement became prominent in the last few years, Christians have sometimes been suspicious of it. However, since the aim of ecology is to make the world a better place in which to live, or to keep it from becoming a worse one, it would seem right for Christians to sympathize, and, if possible, to help.

A good way to show that something is possible is to show that it has been done. Thus, the purpose of this article is to show that it is possible to be a Christian and an ecologist by recounting something about a man who was both.

The life of the English writer and thinker H. J. Massingham (1888-1952) developed into a long, often painful, but ultimately successful quest for rural roots and spiritual fulfillment.

Massingham was born into a free-thinking, Liberal, late-Victorian family which was established in a progressive and thoroughly urban milieu. He ended his life as a firm believer in Christianity, a conservative (in the non-party sense that he advocated the conservation of traditional values) and a country-dweller who had abandoned the city and made his home in a rural environment.

A free-lance writer for most of his working life, Massingham produced numerous books on a wide variety of topics. He first made a name for himself as a nature-writer in the style of W. H. Hudson, but later extended his range to include more general regional and topographical subjects. He was always eager to further the cause of rural craftsmanship and traditional husbandry.

Although Massingham never became a practising Catholic, he was baptised into the Catholic Church in the early 1940s, his motive: "I wanted, so to speak, to sign on".¹ This involvement helps to explain the cluster of books written at this time which were concerned directly with the relation between religious beliefs and practices and the cultivation of the land. The books are his autobiography *Remembrance* (1942), *The English Countryman* (1942) and, perhaps most significant of all, *The Tree of Life* (1943).

One Over-Riding Theme

The over-riding theme of Massingham's 1943 book was best expressed by the extract from a letter which he had received from an unnamed naval lieutenant which he used to open his first chapter.

I feel that the loss of the love of the land for its own sake and the loss of the Christian religion are the greatest tragedies this country has ever suffered.²

For Massingham, these two were inextricably interconnected.

This ecologist came to believe that the "ultimates of life"³ were represented in the sacred trinity of God, Man and Earth. Massingham found symbolic physical realization of this in the pattern of the medieval village-community where the open fields clustered around the manor-house and cottages which were all dominated by the hallowed fabric of the village-church.⁴

For Massingham, this analogy was no accidental parallel, for both are foreshadowed by, and implicit in, the pattern revealed in the Gospels: "The triune relationship of the good earth, the good husbandman and heaven over all is truly contained in the life of Christ" (TL, 26).

Massingham's Christ was, first and foremost, "the Christ of the Trades." "The King of Kings," he insisted, "was born in the village cow-byre" (TL, 18). Christ's mother was a peasant, Joseph a carpenter, and homage was paid to him at his birth by unlettered shepherds. Christ was born into a rural area ("The eternal 'I Am' made his temporary home with the most immemorial of all human settlers on the cultivated earth" [TL, 20-1]). He taught through parables drawn from farming and husbandry and instituted "the informal ceremony of the Last Supper, wherein the unity between nature and the new faith is expressed in the sacramental aspect of the bread and the wheat" (TL, 25). The relation between his life and teachings and the eternal processes of country life was both natural and organic: "If the birth of Christ be the meeting of man and God, the farmyard is the meeting-place of man with nature" (TL, 18).

Massingham stressed the rural matrix of Christianity because he was aware that the temptation to stress the spiritual world at the expense of the physical creation

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had proved a serious and, to himself, a fatal stumbling-block in Christian thought and practice. For this reason he discussed at some length those aspects of Western Christianity wherein the vital relation between the two had been maintained successfully. He noted that attachment to nature was an intrinsic part of Celtic Christianity, and commented:

If the British Church had survived, it is possible that the fissure between Christianity and nature, widening through the centuries, would not have cracked the unity of Western man's attitude to the Universe (TL, 40).

Massingham praised the early Cistercians who "practised a husbandry in which farming was part of religion, and religion was in daily contact with nature" (TL, 52). He also praised the long line of parson-naturalists, such as Gilbert White of Selborne, for demonstrating the wisdom of God in his creation. Gilbert White was one of the earliest English ecologists whose *Writings* Massingham had edited in a handsome two-volume edition in 1938. Massingham saw no way in which Christianity could be rejuvenated until it came to realize

that its own division from nature has pauperized it as an all-sufficient gospel for modern, grown-up, Western man, wrecked in the bitter sea of his delusion of self-will (TL, 17).

Close Analogies Cited

Massingham also saw close analogies between the Roman *latifundia* at the time of Christ (one of the causes of the eventual break-up of Roman civilization) and the Enclosure movement in England which reached a peak in the late eighteenth century and spelt the end of a traditional peasantry.

The subsequent history of Industrial man, with the conquest and exploitation of nature replacing peaceful co-operation, has produced the problems of over-population, pollution of the environment, and the misuse of natural resources. Massingham forecast it a generation ago:

Nemesis for running athwart the natural law is already in operation, both from the kingdom of nature and in the society of man, and no matter what subject be taken nor at what angle the causes of that nemesis be examined, the failure of the modern experiment is seen to be so because it is anti-Christian, anti-natural and anti-realistic (TL, 173).

Now that society is beginning to reap the whirlwind of the Industrial past (and the appropriateness of the rural and biblical allusion found in Hosea 8:7 would not have been lost on Massingham), suspicion of "Progress" has become almost common-place. But when Massingham was writing, this was a revolutionary and, to many, a willfully eccentric position. As a result, his was the voice of one crying in the wilderness.

The irresponsible conversion of good agricultural land into building-sites, accepted by a centralized government which neither knew nor cared about the consequences, had proceeded unchecked until the war demonstrated in no uncertain fashion the vital importance of a native agriculture.

Although the threat of soil-erosion ought by Massingham's time to have been obvious, his warning ("once contemporary farming starts 'progressing,' it heads straight for the Dust Bowl" [TL, 148]) went generally unheeded. The overuse of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, the dangers of deforestation and indiscriminate hedge-grubbing, the effects of pollution on rivers and streams, were all subjects on which Massingham argued from a minority position that has since been justified.

Massingham's attitude to the agricultural and scientific trends of his time should not be seen as wholly critical and destructive. Though his diagnosis was gloomy, he offered constructive proposals to assist in recovery.

Despite an accident that resulted in the loss of a leg, Massingham devoted his energies to the dissemination of ideas that he considered essential for a revival of sound agricultural methods. To this end he edited three books each of which brought together the opinions and recommendations of experts who shared many or all of his principles. These three books were *England and the Farmer* (1941), *The Natural Order: Essays in the Return to Husbandry* (1945) and *The Small Farmer* (1947). They contained essays on such subjects as "Soil Fertility," "The Reclamation of Grasslands," "Self-Sufficiency," "Mechanization and the Land" and "The Homestead Economy." Here and elsewhere he untiringly warned of the dangers of monoculture and put the positive case for small and mixed farms. This case was argued from an economic viewpoint in terms of practical efficiency and from a psychological viewpoint in terms of personal human fulfillment.

Meaning of Husbandry

Massingham's introduction to *The Natural Order*, appropriately titled, sets the whole subject in a broader perspective, involving the religious perspective. The "husbandry" to which a return is advocated implies more than sound farming methods and healthy attitudes towards the land. It includes

the proper balance of town and country, the full development of the home market, agriculture the *only* primary industry, the abandonment of the idiocy of long-distance farming by urban clerks and officials who try to cheat nature with their own little industrial gadgets, the recovery by the country of its indispensable self-government and therefore the recovery of local and personal responsibility.⁵

We shall not, he insists, even comprehend the true meaning of husbandry "unless we relate it to the first principles of the natural law, which is an earthly manifestation of the eternal law" (NO, 7).

A counsel of perfection? The daydream of an impractical visionary? Perhaps, though it would be a mistake to label Massingham as a die-hard reactionary. He made a firm distinction between natural change and artificial progress, and his arguments were based on knowledge, not mere sentiment. Many of his opinions, ridiculed in his own time, are being considered much more seriously today. Conversely, much of what he advocated has been ignored, and the results of moving in the opposite direction (Britain's current and continuing

economic dilemma is the most obvious instance) are hardly encouraging.

It is true that some of his work has dated. Archaeological discoveries since his death (for instance, the implications of radio-carbon dating and the findings at Olduvai) suggest that some of his arguments derived from what is known of prehistoric man must be qualified.

Some of the farming methods he opposed have had a greater short-term success than he anticipated, though whether long-term effects may offset this remains to be seen. The triumphs of one generation tend to become the curses of the next (a fact that made Massingham suspicious of all quick solutions), and it may be a long time before a balanced assessment of his criticisms and recommendations will be possible.

But, whatever qualifications of detail may have to be made, his overall "philosophy" (if that is not too abstract a term) remains impressive. His faith in the ultimate unity of "Mother Earth and the Fatherhood of God" (TL, 15) is a continuing inspiration. His attitude is constant without being inflexible.

Above all, his vision is one of life. The local community is seen as "the cell of the national body corporate" (R, 120); membership of the Church is seen in

terms of "the idea of the cell within the organic body" (R, 125). "Organic," "living," "growth" are keywords. He never despaired. Even when most pessimistic he was always prepared to hail "the germination of a new sacramentalism towards nature which is implicitly religious" (TL, 189). Appropriately, his confession of faith at the close of the twelfth chapter of *Remembrance* ends with the words, "Spero et credo."⁶

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- ¹*Remembrance: An Autobiography* 1942. London: Batsford, p. 125. Hereafter cited in text as R.
- ²*The Tree of Life* 1943. London: Chapman & Hall, p. 11. Hereafter cited in text as TL.
- ³*The English Countryman: A Study of the English Tradition* 1942. London: Batsford, p. 11.
- ⁴Massingham, it should be noted, did not idealize the Middle Ages in sentimental fashion; his treatment is informed, qualified and judicious.
- ⁵*The Natural Order: Essays in the Return to Husbandry* 1946. London: Dent, p. 7. Hereafter cited in text as NO.
- ⁶For further critical discussion of Massingham and his work, see the chapter devoted to him in my full-length study *The Rural Tradition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press; Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1974), and Nicholas Gould's article, "A Eulogist of Traditional Husbandry," *The Ecologist*, 6, 128-131. May, 1976.

GENETICS AND CREATION STUDIES†

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Modern creationists, with few exceptions, have not given much attention to modern genetics. Yet the study could be most useful. On the other hand, it reveals many difficulties for evolutionists. Indeed, the subject might better be called, not evolutionary genetics, as is sometimes done, but rather population genetics.

In this article much recent work is mentioned. Difficulties are pointed out for both theories commonly proposed from an evolutionary viewpoint: the classical theory and the balance theory. But some points emerge which creationists have come to believe on other grounds, for instance, that many creatures have far more potential for variation than has been suspected until recently. This can be seen to be a provision by the Creator, to allow creatures to cope with changing conditions which might arise.

The "evidence" for alleged macro-evolution is generally collected from many different disciplines. Still, decisive proof, if any, might be supplied by two scientific areas only; other disciplines might furnish only "circumstantial evidence".

It is clear which these two areas are: *geology* and *paleontology* should supply the *historical* evidence (fossils, essentially) which would prove that a general evo-

lution had actually taken place. And *genetics* should display the *biological* mechanisms which prove that a general evolution is actually possible and likely.

Modern creationists have dealt a lot with historical geology and paleontology, but relatively little with modern "evolutionary" genetics. Their arguments usually amount to stating that natural selection only eliminates harmful mutations, and that mutations are very rare and nearly always deleterious. Such a simplification involves two dangers: first, that of seeming to ridicule a very difficult and rich science practised by some very bright scientists; and second, of missing the important recent discoveries which, properly understood, strongly support the creationist point of view.

Modern "evolutionary" genetics is, of course, based on a strong presupposition which is directly expressed in the name. This presupposition is that general evolution has in fact taken place. The name "evolutionary genetics" implies this; but it promises far too much.

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