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Nature and Scripture in Bernard Charbonneau's *The Green Light*

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Having just had the privilege to deliver my English translation of Jacques Ellul's posthumous book on *Theology and Technique* for Wipf & Stock, I may note how one of its main interests is the way it makes explicit the intertwining of the two strands of his lifelong investigation, carried out in the parallel series of books devoted to their respective ramifications, that here come together at last. A crucial issue on which that convergence comes to bear is that of "Limits", to which an important chapter is devoted. It deals among other things with the thesis, fashionable since Lynn White's famous 1966 article about "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis", that locates them in Biblical religion's "departure from the origin there were limits to man's enterprise over nature", when, "surrounded by a sacred universe, man knew himself to be limited in his enterprises. He might have techniques, but he could not use them just anywhere nor anyhow." The Promethean hubris of the "unlimited remained a virtuality, but prohibitions remained more powerful."

And so it comes about that Christianity intervenes in this equilibrium, by desacralizing the world, deritualizing religion and negating magic. It brings things down to being only things, it refuses the limits of a sacred that it manifests as imaginary, it kills the gods of the forest, the earth and the waters, and as a result puts all things at the disposal of man who can, from now on, use 'nature' as he sees fit, without limits imposed from the outside. Why should one respect what is now no more than matter?

And we must here pay heed to B. Charbonneau's call-out: by spiritualizing God too much, by making him radically heavenly and Transcendent, man was necessarily pushed away toward Matter, his action was materialized, man's material instinct was liberated. ... Christianity has separated what the ancient world, and the traditional world, had carefully joined, balanced. From that moment on, man may seek the most efficient means and use everything without limits and without shame. The unlimited is inherent to Christianity itself, perhaps not the Christianity of theologians, but Christianity as experienced by the masses of the faithful, and producing effects that were not so much spiritual (having to do with holiness), but concretely historical ones.¹

Ellul seems to be referring here, perhaps from an early draft, to the chapter on "Nature and Christianity" of Bernard Charbonneau's 1980 book, *The Green Light. A Self-Critique of the Ecological Movement*, my English translation of which has just appeared at Bloomsbury, 2018 (*Le Feu vert. Autocritique du mouvement écologique*, Paris, Karthala, 1980), as well as to Bavarian writer and environmentalist Carl AMERY's 1972 book *Das Ende der Vorsehung. Die gnadenlosen Folgen des Christentums*. Both Ellul and Charbonneau engage at length with its 1976 French translation as *La Fin de la Providence*, albeit with different emphases. A fascinating paper could focus on teasing out the instructive nuances between their respective treatments of Amery's indictment of Christianity, which I will not attempt here, beyond saying that Charbonneau is much more positive about the latter, whereas Ellul remains rather defensive and apologetic. This is what enables Ellul's just cited mention of Charbonneau's challenge to Christians to seamlessly segue into an implicit account of what sounds more like Amery's positions.

Nor will I attempt to zoom back and give a panorama of Bernard Charbonneau's thinking on Nature and Christianity, a topic that exercised this reverent agnostic all his life, largely in uneasy but mutually fruitful dialogue with the staunch but all the more critical

¹ Jacques ELLUL, *Théologie et Technique. Pour une éthique de la non-puissance*. (Yves Ellul & Frédéric Rognon, eds.) Geneva, Labor et Fides, 2014, pp. 181-182.

Christian Jacques Ellul. An admirable paper along these lines has already been given by Frédéric Rognon at the Bernard Charbonneau conference in Pau in 2011, which I urge readers of French to download from the online proceedings.² But in keeping with this year's IJES conference theme, I will be confining myself in this paper to trying to retrace Charbonneau's close reading of the Bible over the first half of the "Nature and Christianity" chapter of *The Green Light*, this being his most sustained published engagement with Christian Scripture itself as a focus, rather than Christian civilization in general, in order to tease out the dynamics and paradoxes of the denial of limits which has largely driven the latter.

From the outset, Charbonneau draws from the Creation story a rebuttal of its simplistic anti-environmental interpretation by non-Christians and even by some Christians like those supporting the current US administration, since "man received as his property the earth that Providence created for him. But nowhere does it say that he has the right to destroy God's handiwork. This sovereignty given to man has another, even more basic reason. If God gives it to him, it is because God created him in his image: sovereignty over nature belongs to the very being of the God of Jews and Christians", since, unlike "Greek or Oriental 'pagans'" who divinized nature, "the personal and transcendent God distinguishes himself from it." (GL66) But if likewise "the Old Testament

² Frédéric ROGNON, "Bernard Charbonneau et la critique des racines chrétiennes de la Grande Mue", in: Alain CAZENAVE-PARRIOT, ed., *Bernard Charbonneau: habiter la terre. Actes du Colloque du 2-4 mai 2011, Université de Pau et des Pays de l'Adour*, DVD accompanied by a booklet, Université de Pau et des Pays de l'Adour, 2011, pp. 108-116. The text of this lecture is available on the Internet: http://web.univ-pau.fr/RECHERCHE/SET/CHARBONNEAU/documents/Actes_colloque_Bernard_CHARBONNEAU_Habiter_la_terre_SET.pdf.

reminds man that he was drawn from the silt of the earth”, and to that extent stands over against it.

The sovereignty he has been granted is not absolute like that of his creator, it is bounded by Adam’s finitude, and due to sin, his work is never purely good. If, instead of being the vague sense of a general and abstract evil, the awareness of sin and evil was that of our own limits and of human weakness, it could be the wellspring of a more realistic view of nature, and warier of man and his works. (GL70)

But the exile from Eden into a nature now fallen along with man and turned into “a jungle ruled by the survival of the fittest” (GL67), instead launches its former lord on a path of precarious mastery, where he constantly feels the need to defend and consolidate the limits of his uneasy comfort zones, so that “it is the divine curse that condemns him to build the city” (GL70).

Condemned to till the earth, he is less and less in magical communion with things, brought to mere utility by a will to power that reduces them to dust as soon as he lays hold of them. An ambivalent curse since it was imposed by God, work is both a duty and a blessing that happens to come along with the promise of deliverance from it. (GL67)

But a perverse interpretation of this “curse-blessing” afflicts many one-sided readers of the Bible, such as the Puritans, who “had a religion of work that they transmitted to capitalist societies”:

As long as we are going to bear suffering and inflict it upon ourselves, we might as well derive delight from it, either by enjoying other people’s suffering out of sadism or our own suffering out of masochism: a specifically human and Christian vice, doubtless unknown in nature. But look at these new pleasures! (GL67)

This is of course how the new dispensation of a consumer society driven by an endless stream of new technological distractions could arise from the same Biblical soil

as the this-worldly asceticism of the Protestant work ethic, now updated as the prosperity gospel. “For, always for good or ill, the old man lives on in the new: the pagan in the Christian.” (GL68)

“But it would be a mistake to reduce the Old and even the New Testament to a progressive ideology,” Charbonneau insists, for “there is hardly a chapter without its own retort:”

At the same time as the condemnation of nature, we find in the Bible its glorification. It is everywhere in the Old Testament, rooted (or mired), far more than the New, in its soil and its people: in the Promised Land that is not in Heaven but smack in the middle of a geographic and historical crossroads. (GL69)

Still, “the Heavenly Jerusalem is not of this world, and things go awry every time man attempts to build it on earth. (...) And the *Psalms* and the *Prophets* constantly renew the condemnation of any human work that wants to equal that of God.”

Although the New Testament continues the spiritualist and universalist tradition of the prophets, it remains nonetheless rooted in a Galilean countryside peopled by shepherds, agriculturalists and fishermen, where nature is omnipresent. (GL70)

In the guise of the birds and the lilies of the fields, “far from being cursed, nature is held up as an example to men, with their anxiety and greed for power and money.”

But the glorification of nature in the New Testament is not exactly that of the Old. It is no longer its power that is praised, but its humble beauty and its carefreeness. What is put into question by the Gospel and the prophets, more than nature, is the social power that does it violence, as it does to men. It is war, money, the Law. (GL70)

Christ thus lives “like an anarchist who ignores the economy and politics, without which men would have little power over nature. If Christians had strictly followed the

Gospel's teaching, their power would hardly have gone beyond that of a tribe of gypsies or Indians." Just as Biblical transcendence tends to "bring upheaval to the earth in the attempt to realize an impossible ideal," "Gospel anarchism is condemned to subvert a society that can only realize the conditions of freedom by translating them into laws and sanctions. But if the old law is abolished, it is in favour of another one that belongs to personal conscience and love," applied to nature as much as to the neighbor.

If Christ finishes the process of disembodiment of the spirit, he re-embodies it on the other hand as no other religion has done, in a God-man who, through his body, lives, experiences death throes and then expires on a cross in his time and place. (GL71)

The kind of behaviour that led Jesus to this divine consecration of human life is inseparable from his corporeal assumption of its mortal limits, so that incarnation translates ethically into "hearing these words and putting them into practice" —however paradoxically, since "no law determines how that is supposed to happen, it is up to freedom to do it. When that happens, nothing is negligible anymore: neither earth nor history; at every moment, a game is being played out in which the stakes are personal and universal salvation," (GL71) all the more so since "a secularized, rogue Christianity is at work throughout the human species" (GL72), driving it to the Sixth Great Extinction along with all the other species its dubious triumph endangers.

Progress, the continual development of science and technique, is inseparable from evangelical Christian faith; without it, it would have lacked an engine, nothing would have driven humans, until then steeped in the sacred, to break with the gods, except for the God-Man. (GL72)

But if the old chains binding man to the earth and man to man held on their own, the new link can only be tied freely by every man, at the risk of losing himself. (GL72)

In the aggregate of the sum of personal commitments required to possibly steer mankind on the narrow path to meaningful collective survival, the odds appear slim indeed to Bernard Charbonneau. He thus welcomes Carl Amery's call for an end of Providence as the assumption of a divinely ordained happy end to the human adventure on this planet. Where Ellul takes the latter to task for leaving out the transcendent hope that he deems indispensable to keep the future open, Charbonneau stays with the uncomfortable question of the "only thing we can hold against pure Christianity:"

Is not the challenge it puts to the hominid mammal, that of a new Law embodied in an individual freedom, too far beyond its capacities? (GL72)

That question is not a rhetorical one to this agnostic. Yet even in the worst-case scenario, Charbonneau maintains there is no way back to conditions prior to Biblical Revelation and its near-fatal world-historical consequences: "the old order is crumbling and we do not have any other way" beyond the fateful conjunction of system and chaos leading to entropy and extinction than that of embodied personal freedom which Christian Scripture opened, for better or for worse.

If it happens that man is not up to the challenge of his own destiny, then that will have been the mistake of his Creator, whether God or nature. (GL72)