

INTERVIEW

EXPANDING OUR MORAL VISION BEYOND THE HUMAN COMMUNITY

A Conversation with Donald Worster



Donald Worster, a native of Needles, California, is the Meyerhoff Professor of American Environmental Studies at Brandeis University. He is the author of *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, which was awarded the 1980 Bancroft Prize in American History, and of *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity and the Growth of the American West*, a provocative 1985 book which explores how the manipulation of water in combination with frontier myths propelled the Western United States to exceed its natural limitations and become overpopulated. This interview was conducted by Elbert Peck in August 1988.

IN RIVERS OF EMPIRE YOUR CHAPTER ON THE MORMONS IS ENTITLED "THE LORD'S BEAVERS"

That's because the role that water has played in Mormon history has not been given enough attention. Generally, people who study their own religion tend to take an idealist approach—they see those ideas as having an independent life and an ideal set of origins. But

material conditions do affect the way people think, even the way they think religiously. I think it is hard to understand Mormonism as we know it today apart from its Utah setting, its setting in the arid west, its relation to water.

The reference to beavers was not meant to be degrading. I've always been amazed at how much identification there has been with the bee and the beehive in Utah; but it seems to me to be a mischosen or inappropriate metaphor, given the role of water in Utah history and in the formation of its communal culture and religion.

Like bees, beavers are communal; they are very family centered. There's probably no more appropriate totem for this state and its people. It strikes me as interesting how in many societies we identify with animals—sometimes insects, but mainly the larger animals. Even today within the Judeo-Christian tradition we do what native peoples in North America did: we often identify ourselves with an animal. A number of American Indian tribes identified with the bear. Mormons have done that with

the bee. The point is we continue to do this, and yet it strikes me that in modern society we don't take seriously the implications of doing it. For us it's simply a kind of symbolic relationship; it's not a genuine ethical relationship, it's not a spiritual relationship with what we've chosen. That makes us different from, say, the Australian aborigines who choose the wallaby, with which they have a fraternal as well as a symbolic relationship. They're allied together in a spiritual harmony and unity, and I doubt if that really ever developed here in Utah, not just with the bee but with all of what was here before, with the natural world.

DID THE SCRIPTURAL COMMAND TO HAVE DOMINION PREVENT THAT UNITY?

Anyone who came West in the middle of the nineteenth century, Mormons included, came with a lot of cultural attitudes about water and land. It was hard to grow up in America at that point and avoid developing an ethos of domination over the natural world. Curiously, at the same time Americans were generally celebrating the natural world. That was all we had to give us a sense of identity in terms of the world of nations. We didn't have cathedrals, we didn't have an old civilization, old cultural institutions, and so on, but what we had was nature in abundance. So in the nineteenth century America became "nature's nation." A nation that was peculiarly blessed by nature, a nation that had a peculiarly close relationship with the natural world. However, at the same time we were saying all that endlessly to ourselves, we were also bent on domination and conquest over the natural world; people saw no real contradiction in their set of attitudes.

I think the Mormons who came to Utah had precisely that same sort of contradiction, a deep contradiction that they were not aware of. It looks like a contradiction to us today because it is hard to see how you can celebrate something you are in the process of dominating, but that was a common American characteristic. We've done this with American Indians, too. We celebrated them at the same time we were setting out to dominate and even in some cases exterminate them. That is an old pattern in American society—ruining, spoiling, and killing what we most cherish. Even today, from the president on down, we somehow consider ourselves a more natural people than others. When Reagan gets on his horse and rides around the ranch that he cherishes, I'm sure he feels in some sense that he is an environmentalist. But his political policies don't follow that; in fact they're almost diametrically opposed to it. It's not just his peculiar con-

tradition, it's a national and cultural contradiction. It's so in Utah, and it's so in Massachusetts.

At some point we must become more self-aware of the contradiction between our values and policies, and that's where we seem to be arriving in the country as a whole. When you become more aware of the contradiction, you try to resolve it. That greater self-awareness is what environmentalism is about, and I must say that Utah is still not on the cutting edge of the environmental movement. There is still not much awareness of contradiction in this state.

IDEALLY, WHAT IS THE CORRECT RELATIONSHIP TO THE LAND, ESPECIALLY FOR THE DESERT?

The primary thing that is necessary today, for anyone living anywhere in the country, but especially for people living in areas such as Utah where vital natural resources are scarce, is to get control of one's needs. That is, to determine which are our real needs and which are the needs that we've just invented, created, or thought up. This is a challenge which we have to face all through the American West.

I often quote William Mulholland, the water and power director for Los Angeles in the early part of the twentieth century, who said, "If we don't get the water we won't need it." That is, go and get everything you can get out of the environment and then discover how you can use it later. That same philosophy has been applied up and down the whole Colorado River Basin—"Let's get the water before someone else gets it and then we'll discover how to put it to use." So, the primary challenge in every state is to put some limits on our sense of need. Until we do that we are vulnerable to manipulative, powerful forces that move us this way and that, and then our lives are out of our control. Unless you can control your needs, which partly means to define them, then you have no control over yourself, over your community, over your destiny.

That is a very abstract answer, but it speaks on the deepest metaphysical, spiritual and psychological levels about what is needed in the West. What is the amount of water we really need in this state to serve vital human functions, to provide a sense of community, to preserve our traditions, and to provide a home for our children? We have to identify our values and personal values and then ask, what do we need in the way of natural resources to get them? That's not been done so far in any advanced consumer society.

In Utah, any extension of large-scale intensive agriculture is clearly out of the question;

it cannot even be sustained at present levels. I think small-scale agricultural uses of water in various valleys can probably be sustained for a long time to come. But large-scale intensive uses, involving inter-basin transfers of water that tie in up and down the Colorado River and so forth, are responsible for a whole series of environmental problems. We have assumed for the last 100 to 150 years that we could turn the West into a major agricultural producer. That was unrealistic. It can't be sustained, and over the next fifty years everybody in the West is going to have to accept a much smaller agricultural base than what we now have or what we wanted to have. Agriculture is going to migrate back East where there is more natural rainfall and where the environmental and ecological problems are less overwhelming. Water in the West is going to be increasingly used for other purposes, urban and industrial. We also have to arrive at some idea of how many people we can optimally support. Again, we have had extravagant ideas: the nineteenth century had a vision of hundreds of millions of people living here. I think Westerners are beginning to recognize that extravagance, but we must ask very specifically, "How big should Salt Lake City be?" "How can it possibly go on and on?" "How can we sustain Los Angeles as the second biggest city in this country—a city in a desert?" At some point those questions must bring us to consider population control—the size of families, etc. I realize that this is a particularly sensitive issue in pro-family Utah. But we have almost a quarter of a billion of people in this country, and if you consider not just our numbers but the demands those numbers make on the environment, we are one of the most overpopulated countries on earth. In a great many ways the American West is one of the most overpopulated regions of this continent. We don't want to think of ourselves in that way—overpopulation is supposed to be a problem in Calcutta, not Salt Lake City. How can you endlessly sustain that American lifestyle in a desert? Especially a lifestyle which is bent on endless economic growth, endless want, endless proliferation of demand.

SEEMS LIKE YOU'RE ANTI-CAPITALISTIC.

There isn't going to be a solution to the challenge of environmental limits anywhere on the planet within a purely capitalistic framework. I'm not anti-capitalistic in some absolute sense. Capitalism is a great system in many respects, certainly for its achievements in production and technology. The whole world

recognizes those achievements. But it's not a system that is well designed for living within ecological limits because it's premised not only on endless economic growth but on endless envy.

There are other disadvantages: I don't see how you can sustain forever a system that is based on calling vice a virtue. I don't know of any other system that has tried to make greed a virtue. We all know that it's a trick, a trick we've tried to learn to play on ourselves, but I don't see how we can continue to fool ourselves that greed is a virtue or believe that we can find a virtuous society emerging from the pursuit of personal greed. In environmental terms it leads to endless emulation and endless envy, so that no matter how much you have you've got to have more to be worthy in the eyes of society. How can you sustain that in the desert? How can you sustain that in a shrinking biosphere?

THE MORMON COMMUNITARIAN EXPERIMENT TRIED TO MASTER NATURE THROUGH TECHNOLOGY, BUT IT WAS ALSO ANTI-CAPITALISTIC. WAS IT A FAILED ATTEMPT?

It represented an important exception to what was going on in the culture at that time. Mormons felt that the idea of turning vice into virtue was phony; I don't think they felt that way for environmental reasons, but their stance had important environmental implications. Maybe we will come back to such religious responses as the best way to deal with capitalism. I'm not personally convinced, however, that any traditional religion has been very successful in returning us to a sense of values. It may be that Christianity and all the religious traditions of the world still have the possibility of an important function here, and I would include Mormonism in that. But they will have to go a step further than they did in the nineteenth century. That is, Mormonism will have to correct its indifference to our ecological situation—the predicament we're in as far as resources—and will have to expand its old moral vision beyond the human community, to accept moral responsibility for the whole community of life on this planet, which includes a great deal more than the people sitting in church.

We cannot get an effective solution to any of our environmental problems—water scarcity and so forth—until we develop what Aldo Leopold called the "land ethic." That is not, as far as I can see, on the agenda of any of the traditional religions in this country. It's about time that they began to take the idea of a land

ethic seriously and to expand their moral horizons—to grow ethically. That's one kind of growth I'm in favor of—ethical growth. The next step in such growth in the country must be to move beyond a narrow anthropocentrism in our attitude toward the land. I mean "land" in the collective sense—plants, animals, the soils, the river systems, the whole biosphere. We need to understand that now that we have power over the biosphere, we also must have moral responsibility. We must develop a community sense, a sense of mutual interaction and mutual benefit. This is what was missing in the nineteenth century generally, and what was missing in the Mormon experiment here in Utah. I don't mean to say having it would have changed things, but only that it just wasn't there. It wasn't a possibility for the culture at that point. It may be a possibility for the culture today, for Utah today and for Mormonism.

Since it was founded, Mormonism has been through some significant changes in its moral vision, and it seems to me that it is possible for people like Ezra Taft Benson and others to lead the Church to a land ethic; to lead others to become more ecocentric instead of anthropocentric. I see that not just as a Utopian ideal but as a practical necessity if we're to develop new ways of making a safe and sustainable living here in the West. I'm quite skeptical that our religions' leaders are willing to do that. Some of them are taking seriously our moral responsibility to the poor and suffering of the Third World, and that's a step forward. But I don't see many churchmen, many key religious leaders anywhere in this country, who really address the environmental and ecological issues. In Japan there are thousands of local environmental organizations, and many of them are led by Buddhist monks. It may be that the only way we can come up with a strong counterforce to our economic institutions is to use some sort of religious counterforce. If so, our religions do not yet appear ready or willing to do that.

IS THIS "RELIGIOUS COUNTERFORCE" ROOTED IN SPIRITUAL MOTIVATION?

Call it pantheism, call it bio-regional consciousness, there are lots of labels being thrown around. Call it an ecological consciousness. Some kind of *holism* is what I'm getting at. That is, a sense that there is a whole out there that includes more than the human species, and that it is in our own self-interest to develop a sense of that whole and a responsibility for it. Otherwise we will continue to have power without responsibility. That is what I see in our water projects all over the West: we've got enor-

mous technological power without any kind of moral responsibility to everything that lives, that is a part of those river systems. We've abstracted water out of all those complex living systems, and we've denied moral responsibility for the consequences. So we have power without responsibility. That cannot go on very long in any culture or society. If you do not expand your ethics along with your power—your capacity to do harm—you self destruct. That's what the history of ethics on this planet teaches.

DOES ADDRESSING WATER ISSUES ADDRESS ALL ECOLOGICAL ISSUES?

Of course not everything. It wouldn't help us solve our problems with the grizzly bear population in Yellowstone, or a lot of other issues. But if we began to put water back into rivers, instead of extracting it as a commodity and ignoring the whole complex of ecological relations of which water is a part; if we began to think about rivers and watersheds and their limits and all that lives in them and the cycles in them, we would cover most of the issues affecting the American West today. I think it would be the single biggest step forward we could take. To see the West not simply as a struggle of Utah versus Arizona versus California over water, but to understand that the Colorado River was once a living entity, and to see that we've killed it, it's dead. There are bits and pieces of it that are struggling to stay alive, but it's "a river no more," as one author calls it. It never reaches the ocean in most years. We've dismantled a lot of living systems in the West, dismantled whole watersheds because we somehow couldn't conceive of them as whole entities. The same thing is true of the Missouri river, it's been totally taken apart. We thought we knew what we were doing, but there is an enormous illusion in all of this.

If we began to think about all of our major rivers in the West as living entities based around water but including all kinds of organisms, vegetation patterns, climate cycles, the whole complex of nature—in other words, if we began to think about them holistically—that would have a profound effect on the politics and economics of this region. Undoubtedly we'd begin to ask questions about the extent which the West has been committed to military and atomic development. All of that gets into the water in some way or another—radiation, for example—everything finally gets into the water. You can't think holistically about rivers without thinking about everything else that goes on in the West. This is true in the East, too, but it is especially true

out here where life is on the biological edge, where there are very strict limits to the key natural resource that life needs to sustain itself.

WHAT ABOUT THE PROMISE OF NEW TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES?

Every recent technological panacea we've come up with has encountered more and more problems as we began to deploy it. I do believe in new technologies; I'm just leery of big technological panaceas.

The latest one that is clearly a disaster is the nuclear power industry. It is the biggest failure in the history of industrial civilization. We now know that it is not going to be the great way to the future. Some people still won't accept that outcome, but, by and large, people all over the world are beginning to do so. It is an enormous failure in which we've invested hundreds of billions of dollars as a way out of our problems.

I can't believe that any administration in Washington is going to revive the project to turn around Arctic rivers to make them flow to Arizona. They would be in the U.S. and Canadian courts for decades trying to push that scheme through. It would involve so many complex issues, and there would be so many people angry about it, that it is just not going to be the way out.

We thought we could desalinate the ocean water; that sounded like a great scheme if we could build the nuclear power plants to provide endless energy to do it. Now, not only do we not have an energy source for the scheme, but we don't even know where we are going to dump all the brine we're going to have left over. Who's going to get it? Where is it going to go?

Yes, I think there is a need for new technologies, for some technological solutions. But like more and more Americans I am skeptical of these big solutions. Finally, I don't think we've got the capital surplus we once had. We're in an economic struggle with very powerful competitors in Western Europe, Japan, and East Asia; how are we going to find the capital to address that kind of competition and at the same time push forward these enormous water and energy projects? The projects we have now were begun at a time when we could ignore cost-effectiveness or any kind of rational economic analysis.

SUPPOSE WE DON'T ADOPT A HOLISTIC APPROACH, HOW WILL WE THEN DEAL WITH THIS APPROACHING CRISIS?

If we fail to adapt and find new ways of

producing a living, and if we don't get control of our numbers and demands, we'll simply disappear as a nation. Large numbers of people may actually die. The risks will get more and more scary.

ARE WE GOING TO SEE VIOLENT MOBS SEARCHING FOR FOOD?

Not in the United States, because for a while we've got a comfortable surplus of food. But certainly in other parts of the world that will be the case. Especially if we simply seek short-term solutions to food supplies for the rest of the world, which would probably undermine our capacity to provide long-range food supplies. We've got to do both.

I'm not really a prophet of doom. I'm a little more optimistic than I may sound. I am a believer in the possibility of change. We're not the first society to face problems of depletion of resources and undermining our resource base. I teach environmental history, and if you look at the world from that perspective it seems clear to me that most societies have been driven by environmental and ecological constraints—demands to adapt and change their ways of thinking—to reinvent what they do. There are societies that have disappeared in the past, and we could face that fate in this country. If we believe that we have to go down with all of our economic solutions intact, all our water projects intact, then we'll probably disappear as a people. But I suspect that this country is a little more adaptive and flexible than that. We are already beginning to rethink most of these questions. I don't think there is much popular sentiment nationally, and less and less in the West, for building new water projects, although there's a sense that we've got to finish the projects we've started like the Central Utah Project. California is a bellwether state when it comes to water. Nobody knows what Los Angeles is going to do over the next fifty years, but the defeat of the Peripheral Canal, stopping the diversion of more water from Northern California, is clear evidence that Californians are not going to follow old patterns. The states are not going to come up with the money on their own for big projects, and the Federal government certainly is not going to do it.

SO WE'RE ADOPTING THE HOLISTIC VIEW ONLY BECAUSE WE HAVE TO?

It may be that when we look back fifty or a hundred years from now we will see that we lived through a cultural revolution. We wouldn't have wanted to call it that at the time, of course.

As far as urban centers are concerned,

there's enough water in the West to sustain urban development for some time to come. The people who are not going to get more water in the future, who are going to be forced to sell their existing water, are the farmers. What we'll do then with that water, until we learn differently, will be to build more swimming pools and do less irrigating of cotton. But already researchers are working on new varieties of grass that require half as much water. We won't give up our lawns, but we won't be growing Kentucky Blue Grass in L.A. We will search every way we can to find solutions. We've done rather well in energy conservation, and we can do even better in water conservation in the West, and that will stave off any absolute growth ceiling for a while.

Most people won't do much adapting strictly out of total altruism for the whole ecosphere. I don't have any faith in pure altruism to find our way to the future, but I do think altruism will be part of the solution. There is a growing sense of responsibility to the land and other forms of life in this country. It may not be the only reason we do things, it may not even be the most important reason. Sometimes, it is true, we give reasons that are really not the real reason—we give economic reasons when we want to give moral reasons. But I have no quarrel with the idea that we are likely to find our way to the future through economic pressures changing our economic thinking, that there will be a lot of fundamental self-interest at work. I see nothing wrong with self-interest being a factor. If it is self-interest to develop a broader holistic vision, then I don't find any real contradiction.

HOW WOULD SELF-INTEREST MOVE US TOWARD GREATER RESPONSIBILITY TOWARD OTHER ANIMALS?

Probably the biggest environmental issue on this planet right now is the loss of biological diversity. And most of that is happening in the Third World through the destruction of the rain forest. Preserving biological diversity on this planet is a moral and altruistic ideal, but it is also in our self-interest. I don't mean to say that every plant we save is going to contain a cure for cancer, but arguments like that are part of the self-interest aspect. We can't separate our health and well being on this planet from the survival and health of so many other organisms and whole communities of organisms. In the past we have thought that our self-interest was totally insulated from the well being and survival of other species, that if we eliminated the passenger pigeon in North America it didn't affect us, that we could do these things with

impunity. Maybe we're more aware than we were in the nineteenth century. When we lose a species, it has become a moral issue and we see that it can affect us; it can affect our future and our survival on this planet.

SOME CHRISTIANS TAKE THE BIBLICAL COMMANDS TO TEND THE GARDEN AND TO HAVE DOMINION OVER THE EARTH AS AN ACTIVE STEWARDSHIP OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR NATURE.

There are people who criticize the idea of stewardship because it is nothing more than enlightened anthropocentrism. That is, it still tends to assume that the earth was created for humans and their welfare. Also, with that sort of thinking the creation becomes a piece of property. The concept of stewardship comes out of a lord and master social world, where the steward was commanded to look after the lord's property to ensure that when he came back it would be in good shape, humming along and producing. Of course, one doesn't have to approach stewardship in so property-conscious a way. Stewardship, for all its faults, would certainly be an advance over what we have now; it would be a form of moral responsibility.

I don't go as far as some critics who believe that our environmental problems today are due to the Book of Genesis. That's much too simplistic. The Judeo-Christian tradition got bent pretty far out of shape by the rise of modern technology, industrialism, and capitalism, and themes of domination were given a lot more emphasis than they had received in the traditional religion. The Christian concept of the natural world is essentially the concept of the Creation—and that's a holistic concept. The Creation is a whole. You can take the view that the whole has got to be understood and appreciated, valued and saved. If that's what one means by stewardship then it seems about as effective as anything else we could invent or create.

I'm a little more nervous about the idea of stewardship as a chain of hierarchy, because that way of thinking seems to be full of possibilities for exploitation. What we need is a much more democratic sense of our relationship to that whole, one that does not place us near the top of a chain of being, somewhere between the angels and the apes, enjoying a special privilege to use and appropriate. I think the direction that we must move is toward a more egalitarian relationship with the natural world. If stewardship can be expanded to include that, then I think it's a useful teaching.

WHAT ABOUT OTHER RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS?

The other religions have not seen much thinking about our environmental predicament. I mentioned the Japanese Buddhist monks leading environmental causes, but Japan has also been driving the whales to extinction. They've been polluting the world. Recently, I read about a group of Japanese businessmen who want to set up a penguin hide factory in Patagonia and make penguin gloves to sell to American teenagers. Apparently, this is going to be a hot new consumer item. A lot of Buddhist businessmen, like their Christian counterparts, have not yet begun to see the contradictions in what they're doing. We've got to get some new awareness of our responsibility awakened in many religious traditions.

Islam has great potential for taking moral responsibility toward the earth, but I don't find the Moslems who are eager to sell oil to the rest of the world and to bring Kentucky Fried Chicken into their countries have discovered that potential. There has been little self-analysis about how to enter a capitalistic economy, little asking how they can build an industrial society and still maintain their traditional moral insights, let alone strengthen them and allow them to grow.

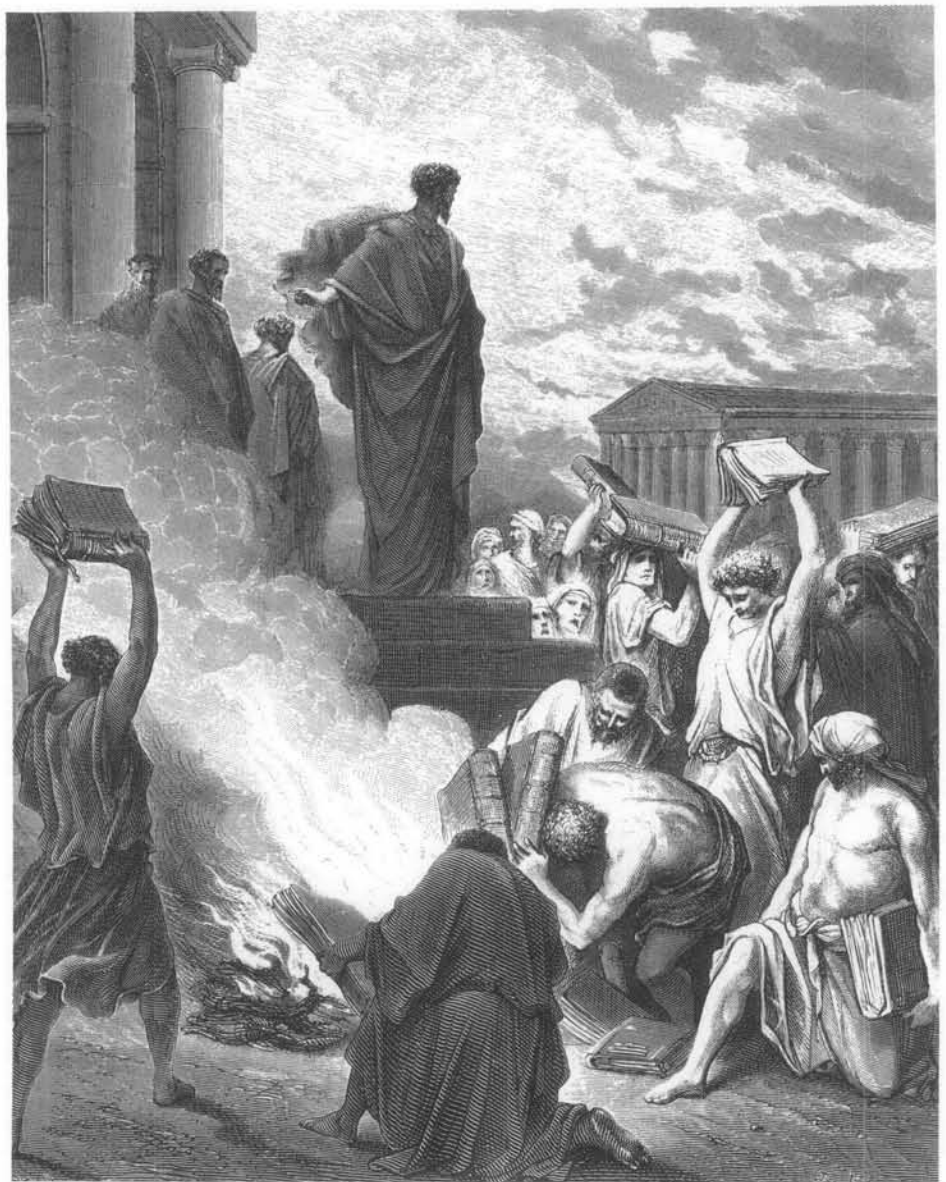
I don't see most of the world's religious leaders doing all that they could to promote this holistic point of view and vision. In the future, the even larger challenge is going to be: How can we move from our multiplicity of religious traditions to a common environmental ethic? That is clearly what we will need. It is too small a planet these days for people to simply go off in completely different, conflicting moral directions. We've got to come together on some sort of planetary consciousness and planetary environmental ethic. Traditionally our ethics have grown out of our religious traditions. But if our religious traditions continue to be as disparate as they have been, then we have to wonder what language we are going to use to talk about these things. We have lots of such communication trouble in this country. Try inviting a Protestant clergyman, a Jewish rabbi, a Catholic priest and a Mormon bishop to discuss these issues: "Give us an answer as to what we are going to do with water in Utah or with endangered species in Alaska;" "Tell us what the earth was made for;" "What is the proper role of humans on this earth?" You know what chaos that is likely to produce. I don't know how we get beyond such chaos except by sitting around and talking at great length and by finding common ground within these moral traditions. The environmental issues of this country require that sort of dis-

cussion. We simply can't withdraw into our different religious sects and expect each of them to come up with its own environmental ethic based on its own tradition. You can look at the abortion issue and see what kind of difficulties there are in trying to reach a consensus among these religious traditions. It's a serious dilemma we're facing, and when you stretch that to the world it's going to be even more serious. How does an American environmentalist raised in a Protestant tradition, for example, talk to a Japanese businessman about whaling?

We Americans have had an extraordinarily confused answer to give to the question of our role in the natural world. We have not yet come up with a single clear, satisfactory answer. Still,

the discussion has moved a long way from what it was when the Puritans arrived in Massachusetts. At least we're much more aware of the many dimensions of the question than we ever were before.

Whatever will emerge, it will have to be pluralistic. It will have to involve a pulling together from various places. This is not the first time we've tackled difficult issues or confronted our differences. We're a diverse nation, racially, ethnically, regionally, and yet we somehow function. We've learned ways to talk to each other. That's what democratic societies are about—that's what democratic pluralism is. An environmental ethic is something we have to find collectively.



"This job as Church historian isn't as hard as I thought it'd be."