

Wednesday February 13, 2013

Here comes the sun!

By Jim Taylor

Here at the 50th parallel of latitude, days are getting perceptibly longer again.

A few weeks ago, if I went outside at 7:00 a.m., it was pitch black. Even the stars had pulled the blankets up over their heads.

Last week, I took the dog out at 7:00 a.m., and there was light.

Not sunlight. The sun had not yet lofted itself over the eastern ridges to illuminate the valley I live in. But there was light in the sky. High clouds blushed pink.

I thought of the first story of creation in Genesis. God said, “Let there be light.” And there was light. And God saw that it was good.

Indeed, it is good.

Sole source

I’m rather surprised, I must admit, that we don’t worship the sun. Unless we’re lying on a beach courting melanoma, that is. Because our existence is utterly, totally, dependent on the sun. All the energy that we get, all the energy that we have, comes from the sun.

We have no alternative energy sources. Wind turbines require solar warming to generate winds. Tidal power relies on the sun to keep the oceans from freezing. Biofuels depend on the sun to grow plants.

Even the fossil fuels we burn so recklessly are the accumulated capital of solar energy that fell on the earth millions of years ago.

Through the miracle of photosynthesis, plants convert solar energy into carbon-based molecules. Which get compressed, over millennia, into coal. Or which feed the animal kingdom, including microbes. Who got compressed, over millennia, into oil. Other organic compounds compost underground, anaerobically, into flammable gases.

True, we could employ nuclear power. But as environmental economist Amory Lovins demonstrated, decades ago, the construction, operation, and decommissioning of nuclear power plants consumes more energy than they produce. Which makes them a losing proposition.

If the sun’s thermonuclear furnace switched off, it would take the world – at a guess – about three months to freeze solid.

Oh, sure, we could keep some home furnaces burning. We could keep industries fired up with fossil fuels. For a while. But we couldn’t heat the fields. The rivers. The oceans. Between hypothermia and starvation, we wouldn’t last long.

Self-sacrifice

As Bruce Sanguin has written, the sun sacrifices itself. For us, if we take an anthropocentric focus. It consumes itself to generate the light and heat that keep us alive. It is the ultimate self-sacrifice, because it gains nothing – absolutely nothing – in return.

Not that I think the sun knows or cares that we earth-dwellers (all plants and animals, not just humans) benefit from its sacrificial life. Perhaps that’s why we don’t love the sun – it is utterly impersonal.

For a brief period, some 3,300 years ago, the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten abolished all gods except the sun, and imposed the world’s first pure monotheism. But it didn’t last. Perhaps the sun was too impersonal for humans to feel a personal relationship with it. Perhaps the priests, deposed as mediators with the supernatural, forced Akhenaten’s son Tutankhamen to revert to the traditional gods.

We no longer consider the sun a god. But I still greet it each morning with awe, delight, and gratitude.

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YOUR TURN

My column about “critical mass” got some, uh, critical comments.

Steve Roney, for example, challenged my argument that the movement is always forward: “There are an infinite number of ideas presented as ‘progressive’ in their time that have been since generally abandoned. Prohibition springs to mind. Also eugenics, repressed memory, Fascism, Communism, Freudianism, Behaviourism, social Darwinism, Social Credit, the Industrial Workers of the World, Syndicalism, Nihilism, travel by airship, Nasserism, European imperialism ... the list goes on and on. The ‘progressive’ movement in the US early in the 20th century was associated with, among other things, racial segregation and strict limits on immigration. This was then progress.

“It is also easy to find social movements whose stated goal is a supposed return to some past condition, and which succeed: Zionism. The English Restoration. The Spanish Restoration. The Reformation....”

Isabel Gibson shared the same concern: “I'm all for being part of a critical mass -- for one thing, thinking that way may keep us from deciding to do nothing because we can't do everything.

“But I'm not as sure of the notion that ‘critical mass always favours some new development’ that doesn't go in reverse. Is that what happened in Hitler's Germany, or Pol Pot's Cambodia? Or is my time scale too short? What, then, of durable ideas like anti-Semitism: pretty regressive I'd say, yet seemingly impossible to stuff back into the bottle. Maybe it's just that all ideas -- the good, the bad and the ugly -- are hard to retract. If that's the case, we would do well to consciously support the ideas we favour, rather than taking their current status for granted.”

Jack Driedger confirmed my thesis, though, as he recalled his own experience as “an elementary and high school classroom teacher. In a classroom of 30 students, if one student refused to respect him, the teacher could still teach. Even if two students did not respect him, the classroom atmosphere was still tolerably conducive to learning, but there was a drain on the teacher's energy. When it got to three students out of thirty, the teacher was in trouble.”

Cliff Boldt wrote, “Your thesis may be right. One can hope.”

Ted Wilson added a caveat: “That ‘radical from Galilee’, the leaders of the 70s feminist movement, those leading the emancipation movement and people like Martin Luther King Jr., had both a vision of their destination and a plan on how to get there. They focused their available resources where they could affect change, attracted ever-increasing support, and eventually achieve their objectives or continue to make the kind of differences in our society that they set out to.

“This was also true of Adolf Hitler. Fortunately it was also true of Winston Churchill and he was able to acquire more resources.”

By contrast, Ted went on, “The Occupy and Idle No More movements have no real destination in mind, nor any kind of action plan. I suspect that the real function of these kinds of movements is to divert the frustration and anger of those who might, just might, have legitimate complaints away from any meaningful actions into dumb useless demonstrations etc. That way nothing significant happens. If they were exposed for what they are things might actually change. Those in positions of power and influence don't want that so let them let them blow off steam and cause minor disruptions which erode their support and make them feel good.”

Finally, William Ball had some thoughts about how critical masses form. He sent along a link to a video which argues that it's not the first person who does something that makes a change, but the second person, the one who decides to join the leader.

If you're interested, the video is at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fW8amMCVAJQ>

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The psalm for Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday before Lent begins, is Psalm 99. When I did this paraphrase, I must have recently been reading about mountaineering. Although we have climbed earth's highest mountains, the peaks remain as inhospitable to our life as outer space. Ancient peoples saw these fearful heights as the habitation of the gods.

1 Like a halo of holiness, the spirit of God envelops the earth.

In the stillness of space, God's spirit gives life;

let us acknowledge our insignificance.

In the emptiness of infinity, God's spirit creates life;

let us acknowledge our interdependence.

2 Look up if you would see God;

raise your sights beyond your repetitive routines.

3 But do not attempt to face God as an equal--

Fling yourself face down on the earth

Before the creator of the heavens.

4 Almighty God, you love to do right.

In your dealings with your creation, you are always fair.

5 We humans grovel before your greatness.

Humbly, we kiss the humus from which you fashioned us.

You are holiness itself.

6 The humus holds the recycled cells of those who came this way before us;

Step by step they searched for you, until you found them.

7 By the pillar of fire and the whispering breeze,

by bonfire and whirlwind, by prophecy and parable,

you showed them your way.

8 Because they tried to follow you, you forgave them their failings;

But those who laid traps for them, you did not tolerate.

9 So pledge allegiance to our God!

Gather at the foot of the mountain, where even the rocks reach up towards our God.

Our God is holiness itself.

For this and other paraphrases, you can order *Everyday Psalms* through Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com or 1-800-663-2775.

HYMNSIGHT

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It's called HYMNSIGHT, and it's for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to:

<http://www.hymnsight.ca> www.hymnsight.ca

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for those who are new to the idea of using projected visuals in church, and for those who have already begun.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look to see if this service scratches where you itch. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it?

Blessings,

Ralph Milton

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
