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Maintaining Stewardship During Farm Crisis

by
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John M. Stitz, no stranger to Religion readers, is Director of Catholic Rural Life in the Kansas City Archdiocese and Chaplain at St. Mary College in Leavenworth. Ordained in 1953, Father Stitz later earned a master's degree in Religion and a doctorate in American Studies at the University of Kansas. He has studied extensively Kansas family farm culture and its relationship to trends in agriculture.

The role of religion in the farm crisis of the 1980s is reflected in a July 9, newspaper story about Dr. Karl Menninger, Topeka, Kan., on the occasion of his 92nd birthday. The "father of American psychiatry" was asked for his view on conditions in society. He responded, "Just say we're in trouble, terrible trouble. We're on the verge of blowing ourselves up. . . . God gave us this earth to take care of, and what have we done with it? We've taken it to the brink of destruction. . . . President Reagan says we have a strong defense to protect ourselves. What we have is power with all these nuclear bombs, but it's not strength. We're more vulnerable than ever."¹

These words spoken by the wise old doctor mirror the major themes of this article. 1. This nation is in serious economic trouble with an unprecedented deficit in the federal budget, and a financial depression in agriculture, the most severe in history. 2. Because God is Creator and entrusted earth to His people, we as God's people are held responsible for stewardship. Dr. Menninger's words, "God gave us the Earth," clearly states the essence of theology of land, a covenant theology linking God, earth and people into an integrated and responsive relationship. From this relationship flows the role of religion in the farm crisis that

affects not only rural people but all people dependent upon food production. 3. Dr. Menninger warns of an impending disaster because of a distorted value system which is contradictory to covenant theology. We are in danger of destroying ourselves as well as the earth's resources, because of the confusion over what is strength and power for our nation.

The popularized notion, supported extensively by current government officials and politicians, is that strength lies in defense, capacity to make war and domination over potential rivals—especially the Soviet Union. People with covenant consciousness, especially farmers, say that the strength of this nation rests in a healthy farm economy, where individual farm families personally oversee the care of natural resources, and in the full employment of all farm and non-farm sectors of the economy.

This article discusses these three themes as components of a theological basis for religious groups to become involved in problems generated by the farm crisis.

First, there is a brief description of the farm crisis in terms of land and people. Second, the details and ramifications of covenant theology are spelled out as they relate to land and people. Third and finally, several aspects of ministry are suggested as a starting point for consideration by religious people interested in making a response to those who suffer because of the farm depression.

Farm Crisis in Terms of People and Land

During the first six months of 1985 the public media brought the farm crisis into focus for Americans. Headlines appearing in the Kansas City Star were indicative: Jan. 27— "Farmers Fear Economic Factors May Lead To

Widespread Failures." May 26—"Farm Crisis Still Hasn't Gone Away." June 9—"Farm Land Values Have Biggest Drop Since '30s." June 16—"Loss of Family Farmers Would Devastate Economy." June 20—"Farm Crisis Imperils Taxes for Schools, States." July 29—"Stress Takes Toll in Farmer Suicides."

The Leavenworth Times carried similar stories: May 9—"Kansas Farmers, Businessmen Going Broke At Record Rates." June 18—"Kansas Farmers' Net Income Plummets."

Stories are told about farmers' frustrations. The Atchison Daily Globe on Feb. 15 in an article, "Farmers are Angry and Frustrated," reported an unprecedented gathering of 500 farmers, their families, bankers and merchants in Baileyville, Kan., a rural town of a few more than 100 people. Bruce Larkin, a 34-year-old native farmer with a college degree in political science, was quoted, "A lot of people around here want to do something, but they don't know where to start. . . . We decided we'd had enough."

Little hope for better times was predicted by the bible of economic interests, The Wall Street Journal, on March 25. A lead story on the economy was captioned, "Sudden Worsening of Nation's \$37 Billion Farm—Export May Postpone Recovery in the Troubled Agricultural Economy."

The stories carry common themes. The financial crisis is fueled by high interest rates, high costs of production supplies, low farm prices and the decrease of land values, the main form of collateral for farmers. The value of farmland is directly related to a farmer's ability to borrow. Decreasing land values mean lowered equity and a decrease of potential to obtain needed capital for the farming operation. Land values have fallen 60 percent from the 1981 peak. Harold Breimyer, University of Missouri economist, predicted, "The total asset value of American agriculture has dropped from \$1 trillion to \$700 billion—and we aren't finished yet."²

A major theme reoccurs in the distress stories. Farmers are in deep financial trouble. Their income is insufficient to offset expenses. Consequently, their way of life, the human condition in which they live and their future as farmers, is in jeopardy. Kansas State University extension economists examined the financial records of 2,000 Kansas farmers, members of the Farm Management Association. The members have access to assistance from financial experts. They tend to be cautious in farm management, keeping to sound business practices. The University officials report that the 1984 average net farm income fell 85 percent from the 1979 income level. Leonard Parker, a leader of the Farm Management program, summarized the crisis in farming, "Financially speaking, almost half of our farmers and ranchers were the same as unemployed."³

The crisis has a broader base than just in the marketplace. Wendell Berry, college professor, poet and farmer, views the farm crisis as an episode in

the history of agriculture loss—"of topsoil, farmers, and farmland." For him, the problem is as much cultural as financial. Modern-day values and attitudes contribute to agricultural methods which lead to erosion of topsoil and the pollution of underground water tables. These factors are related to the potential of food production. Hence, the farm crisis has immediate impact on farmers, and long-range impact on feeding the hungry of the world.⁴ Widespread hunger already exists in most nations, even in the United States. The Physicians' Task Force on Hunger in America reports there are over 20 million hungry in America. And hunger is the eighth leading cause of death among infants, accounting for over 50 percent.⁵

Impact of Crisis on People

The farm crisis is taking its toll on the rural family. Public and private agencies report increased levels of social problems directly related to the financial crisis. University of Missouri sociologists William and Judith Heffernan studied 40 northwest Missouri families who had lost their farms. In 1981 each of the families grew enough food for themselves and 100 other people. In early 1985 the same families had trouble feeding themselves.⁶ Nearly all reported forms of depression, emotional disturbances and mental stress in losing their farms. Children in particular were affected by stress. They received lower grades in school, demonstrated more aggressive behavior and tended to withdraw in personal relationships with other students.⁷

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The number of farmer suicides echo economic cycles. Farmer suicides in Missouri increased from 47 in 1982 to 71 in 1984. This is twice the rate for the average Missourian. Extension officials at the University of Missouri, Columbia, predict that the rate of farmer suicides will increase. Rural sociologist Rex Campbell explains, "Many farmers are worried about how to keep the bank or other lenders from foreclosing on their farms."⁸

The suicide trend, although the most desperate of reactions to the farm crisis, is not widespread, but the statistical increase suggests the deep emotional level of stress affecting farmers as they struggle to save their land, family and way of life. The failure to achieve their life ambitions proves to be too much to bear. More common reactions to the crisis assume various forms of adjustment to loss or change of life status. Such adjustment involves serious and sudden changes in relationships between husband and

wife, parents and children, family and neighbor, family and God. The recent movie, "Country," accurately demonstrates the scope of these changing relationships in a family who lost their farm.

Kansas Methodist Bishop Kenneth Hicks calls this adjustment to change a crisis in faith, faith in self, family and in God.

One farmer became so angry at God he would shake his fist at the heavens, then curse and swear blaming God for his financial losses. The reactions of farmers and rural people to stressful conditions can be reduced to a testing of their faith, the values they treasure, and the trust in their personal relationships. Usually, the immediate members of the family are affected the most. Where does religion fit within the complexities of stress and human responses?

Covenant Relationships for Land and People

Fr. Karl Menninger made a simple profession of faith in covenant theology. "God gave us this Earth to take care of." This statement of belief deserves careful examination. Land and all natural resources are gifts from the God who created them. The act of sharing Earth with people expresses the expansive love of a just God for mankind. Although God shares Earth, He retains ownership (Lev. 25:23). The sharing amounts to a call for people to take care of God's land in a spirit of love (Gen. 2:15). The Lord says, "All the Earth is Mine" (Exod. 19:5). Some may take the words of Genesis 1:28 literally and assume people become like masters, with rights over Earth to conquer and subdue. But the verb "to take care of" follows a command to cultivate (Gen. 2:15). People are stewards, caretakers of a garden that never fully leaves possession and ownership of God, Creator. People, as stewards, are assigned the task to farm, produce food, and take care of the soil and water for the sake of God's people. This command can only be understood properly when taken in context of the covenant relationship between God and people. The covenant is primarily a relationship of love between God and creature, a relationship which ensures life itself. People violate covenant when they either assume ownership of Earth, become like gods, or exploit and abuse the Earth which is ultimately God's garden.

To exclude the relationship of people to land from the boundaries of the covenant opens the way to foreign domination. The covenant protects the land and ensures that it will be properly cared for on behalf of future generations. "Foreign" refers to strangers from God.

The historical development of religion, i.e. the experiences of people of faith, is filled with violations of covenant. And, the unfaithfulness and consequent punishments did not end with the awarding of the promised land to a fallen covenant people. Jesus repeatedly called for a loyalty to

covenant, a loyalty to His Father's will. The call of Jesus carries through to the present day and touches the current farm crisis. Adjusting to abuses of covenant was never simple—even for God. The book of Leviticus describes in detail how the faithful people returned land to original owners every 50th year called the Jubilee year. They took a year off from farming to give the land a year of rest. Then everything started all over again as if to re-enact the beginning of creation. The frontier of agriculture was renewed every 50 years. In this way God controlled the management of His Earth, but His voice has long since faded from the ears of modern agriculturalists.

Few textbooks on agriculture used by institutions of higher learning give any consideration to original land ownership. Modern teachings erroneously assume that individuals, corporate or otherwise, own the land in such a way that it may be used according to the owner's profitable intentions. Students imbued with modern teachings are led to believe that the land owner is master over the land. Successful farming means to expand, accumulate as much as possible. "More is better" and "biggest is best" are code words of modern agriculture, as an object of maximum exploitation has become the fundamental credo of agriculture. Such distortion is a total contradiction to the intent and purpose of covenant, the original plan of the Creator for the Earth to be used by His people for life.

A Valley Falls, Kan. farmer, Loren Long, explains it well, "We huddle together in bonds of narrow interest groups of like-minded people convinced that we alone have a firm grasp of the Truth and that God is on our side."⁹

The practice of agriculture has long since shifted its ideological basis from a covenant religion to what Long describes as the new religion of agribusiness: Farming is just another business whose primary ingredients are management techniques and high technology; whose only purpose is to generate short-term profits.¹⁰

Earning a profit, or making a living worthy of human dignity was not excluded from covenant relationships. But the business of making a living is dependent upon and subject to the limitations of covenant, which protects the land for the future. There is no scriptural basis for the proposal that people become masters of Earth. The human work of caring for land respects covenant relationships which lead to the formation of community. The author of Genesis portrays God on top of the world standing alongside and visiting with Abraham. God gave the land from east to west, north to south to Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 13:14-17). The descendants are as numerous as specks of dust embedded in the earth itself. God apparently was not in any hurry to turn over the mastery of land to anyone else, because the gift was for descendants in the future.

A believer with covenant consciousness understands land ownership in context of that promise to future descendants. Any conscious action on the

part of a farmer with a covenant belief, takes into account that land is sacred and that it, in the final analysis, belongs to the community of God's people for use only. Therefore, the farmer's investment of labor and money is a spiritual as well as a financial matter.

Covenant consciousness recognizes that it is the land, God's land, that holds the descendants of Abraham together as a nation. It is only logical that the first and basic command for social behavior in covenant community should be for people to love the Lord with their whole hearts, whole minds and to love their neighbors as they love themselves (Mt. 22:36-40). This teaching became a significant part of the good news Jesus carried to the villages and countryside of Palestine. Land and resources are more than objects to be used or owned. They become instruments which enable people to fulfill the purpose of creation, to become and develop as human beings (Gen. 2:7).

Bonding through land, stewardship and the practice of love, links problems of people throughout the world. As people struggle for freedom in response to God's covenant call, they are united and bonded by land and love. The famines in Africa are as much a responsibility for Kansas farmers as for African farmers. This is a result of God's covenant call.

Kansas Church Leaders Respond

In February 1985, religious leaders of Kansas met in Wichita at the invitation of Methodist Bishop Kenneth Hicks. They began to discuss the question of how churches can help people suffering from the agricultural depression. They issued a document to express common concerns, as a statement of faith in the people of Kansas they pledge to serve. They renewed a commitment to stewardship and a recognition of God's covenant call. The leaders, Christian and Jewish, pledged allegiance to God the Creator who gave gifts to be cared for. Now that something is in disarray in the relationship of people to land, they feel that words need be spoken and actions taken. Church leadership established an Interfaith Rural Life Task Force to implement programs of active response to the crisis.¹¹

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The statement of Kansas religious leaders and a chapter in a recent document on the U.S. economy by the U.S. Catholic Bishops reaffirm faith in

family farm agriculture.¹² Both bodies express alarm at the accelerated loss of family farms. They recognize and pay tribute to the hard work and value systems that rural people share with the nation. They recognize values of family farm agriculture: the advantages of raising a family in the rural environment, the way of life close to God and nature, family unity bonded by common work, cultivation of community interests, hard work, honesty, sharing, trust and cooperation. But above the ethical, spiritual and social advantages for families, they view family farm agriculture as the most important method of taking care of land, of fulfilling the covenant call to stewardship. They consider the personal and individual attention given to the preservation of nature's ecological system, the protection of water quality, and proper care of soil as the most religious type of response possible on the part of a covenant people. The family farmer, guided by religious values and a spiritual life, cares for land as an expression of covenant faithfulness. Thus, the family farm system is the most rational and effective system of caring for and passing land on to the descendants of Abraham. Covenant service to land demands from the Creator blessings upon land and livestock, a guarantee of sufficient food to feed His people.

Catholic church bishops fear the modern trend toward large-scale ownership and corporate agriculture and absentee landlordism. They fear ownership of land by non-farm family and private corporations who propose to farm with large-scale high technology and hired labor. One reason alleged is that there would be higher risk to exploitation and abuse of land without regard for soil conservation and rebuilding marginal soils.

In their defense of the family farm, the bishops argue that it is a national value to have food production in the hands of those who make decisions based on values, beliefs and attitudes beyond profit motive. It is the full-time family farmer who withstands temporary setbacks due to weather or economic changes, with a firm hope in the future. Family farmers believe in waiting patiently for better times. The bishops see this as an important factor in enhancing national and global food security. This social value also contributes to the support of a plurality of community institutions, thus protecting personal freedoms and the increase of opportunity for people to participate in community life. The bishops suggest that family farm agriculture is necessary to guarantee food supply for domestic and world needs, and a guarantee for democratic freedoms in society.¹³ They revive the Jeffersonian ideal that land ownership in the hands of numerous individual farmers forms the basis for democratic systems in American society.

The words of hope spoken by the religious leaders does not mean that all churches or religious communities are therefore fully in support of saving rural communities and the family farm system of agriculture. The Heffernan survey among Missouri


families who lost their farms gave churches a low rating as a source of help. Families interviewed found churches the least likely agency to be any help. Some pastors went so far as to blame farmers for the crisis.¹⁴

While conducting a survey of family farmers in western Kansas in 1982, I found similar evidence. Farmers gave churches credit for providing some social support, a place to meet, but found little support or sympathy in the struggle to deal with the financial problems. Farmers expected to receive some help in the form of new ideas, planning and organizations especially in view of alleged inadequacies of existing farm organizations.

The two surveys cited may not accurately reflect what churches are doing in the time of farm crisis but it does indicate that farmers undergoing stress look to religious leaders, churches or faith communities for help. The Interfaith Rural Life Committee, the name of the Kansas religious leaders, plans to conduct special workshops for clergy. The sessions are designed to assist church leaders to understand the farm crisis and to plan on an ecumenical basis, programs of support to help rural families.

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Ministries to Rural People

s a director in the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, I meet frequently with ministers from most rural areas of the United States. Reports from various areas over the past five years reflect a growing trend for churches to cooperate in programs of stress management, skill training, establishing crisis hot lines, sharing resources and providing professional legal and counseling services. One Methodist minister reported a plan in a parish to collect funds to provide direct emergency assistance to rural church members in need. It is not unusual to have farm families unable to buy groceries but ineligible for food stamps.

Other churches are providing counseling, building networks of resource people such as lawyers, accountants or people who have experienced farm loss, bankruptcy, divorce, suicide or emotional disturbances. These various ministries of caring are necessary and are sure to multiply as more church judicatories become involved and begin to look for ways to help rural people.

But, a primary ministry for churches and faith communities is the ministry of proclaiming God's word revealed in the covenant. Not all churches

have resources for ministries of caring and healing, but all are rich in methods of proclaiming the word of covenant as it relates to the crisis of land and people. Proclaiming takes place in worship, education, writings, declarations, statements or in various forms of advocacy. Churches are in a unique position to touch all peoples, especially policy-makers. Farmers and rural people are severely limited in contacts with media, or lack resources to affect agricultural policies associated with causes of the crisis. But, churches have resources and advantages to touch all concerned—victims and those who can change agricultural policies.

In proclaiming God's word it is necessary for churches to help society return to the basics of love and service elicited by the Lord's covenant. Proclamation should outline the moral dimensions of the farm crisis. The covenant demand needs to be clarified, described and thoroughly explained to people, especially those without a covenant consciousness.

Covenant consciousness is not popular in society in which basic values, ideals and attitudes have been extensively subjected to Orwellian conditions. By this I refer to a process of defining words in meaning opposite to original definition. In his book "1984," George Orwell called it *doublespeak*. Orwell tells the story of *newspeak*, the media, who are pressured by torture and brainwashing to accept immorality as morality, lies as truth. Some popular slogans were: "War is Peace," "Freedom is Slavery," and "Ignorance is Strength."¹⁵ The story ends with a profession of love for dictator, Big Brother, and acceptance of Big Brother's words as absolute truth. This Orwellian type of rhetoric as applied to war and the arms buildup in America is also applicable to agricultural life.

Politicians and policy-makers frequently use such phrases in support of no action on farm reform. The aliases of "Big Brother," want to create the impression that government supports agriculture whereas the truth is that since the 1950s, American agriculture has supported the economy of the U.S. performing at low parity. This means farmers receive less and less when compared to costs of living. By August 1985, farmers were receiving income at an all time low—about 50 percent of what is needed to pay production costs.¹⁶

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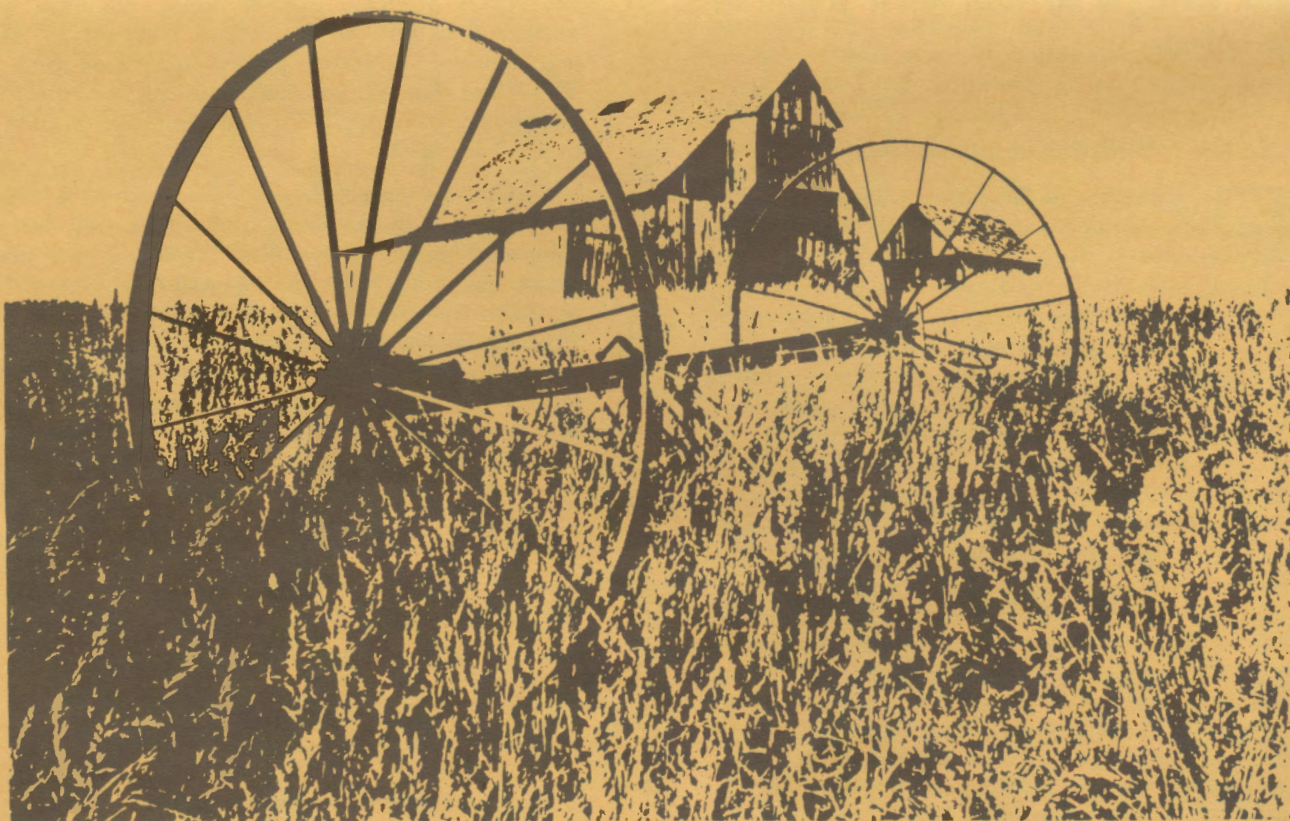
The proclamation by churches must consistently seek to inform and develop a covenant consciousness despite prevailing false ideologies. Cove-

nant consciousness directs people to take care of the land as if it belongs to the Lord. Family farmers with core values of religion, honesty, care and hard work, have an intimate relationship with land guided by a proprietary mind. This is not a mind of ownership as defined by the industrial economy, but a mind possessed by the knowledge, affection and skill appropriate to the keeping and the use of its property. Wendell Berry warns that if society continues to ignore or destroy this profound connection, it will eventually destroy the property and the mind.¹⁷

In our proclamation church people must uphold the integrity and national importance of God's people, the rural people of our society. The proclamation must insist upon a farmer's right to receive income sufficient to maintain his life in dignity if he is to take care of the land, keep it safe from erosion,

keep it beautiful for the next generation. As God promised in covenant, if we are His people, take care of His land, feed His people, be faithful stewards, He will be our God. Why do we fear this? Where is our faith?

People, as stewards, are assigned the task to farm, produce food, and take care of the soil and water for the sake of God's people. This command can only be understood properly when taken in context of the covenant relationship between God and people. The covenant is primarily a relationship of love between God and creature, a relationship which ensures life itself.



COMING

Koyama's Visit Marks Church Anniversary

An ecumenical event will take place in Topeka on November 10, 1985. At 4:00 on that Sunday afternoon, Dr. Kosuke Koyama will speak at a service to be held in Topeka's First Christian Church. Currently a professor at New York City's Union Theological Seminary, Koyama's presence will mark the 75th anniversary of the founding of the primary Christian unity arm of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Koyama is considered to be one of the leading Asian theologians. His recent book, *Three Mile an Hour God*, suggests that we will have a better awareness of God's presence when we understand that God's pace is more like that of walking rather than zooming about in cars and airplanes.

Fall Conferences Slated

"Spiritual and Legal Dimensions of Emergency Health Care" is the subject of the 1985 conferences. The schedule is:

Manhattan	Sept. 20-21
Great Bend	Sept. 27-28
Topeka	Oct. 4-5
Salina	Oct. 18-19

Eight contact hours for continuing education may be earned by nurses; Washburn University is the provider of record. Continuing education is also provided for social workers, KSR is the provider of record and at Great Bend for physicians, the American Academy of Family Physicians is the provider.

Essay Contest Announced

The essay contest for high school students was received with such interest in 1985 that the Trustees of the Kansas School of Religion will schedule another competition for this year, according to Stitt Robinson, president. The theme for 1986 is "Religion and the Nuclear Age."

As last year, the competition will be in two levels. The winning essay in each county will be determined by a county clergy group. The winning essays from the counties will then be judged in Lawrence by the KSR committee. Prizes will be awarded of \$300, \$200, and \$100 for the first three places. Further information will be coming.

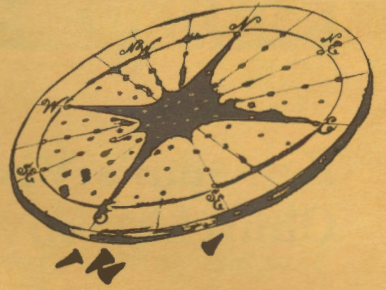
Drinan to Lecture April 15

The 1986 KSR Lecturer is Robert Drinan, Professor of Law at Georgetown University. Father Drinan also served in Congress for a decade. He will bring to our campus his comprehensive analysis of religion and politics. The date for his principal lecture will be April 15.

Footnotes

1. Kansas City Star, July 9, 1985, p. 4A.
2. Newsweek, July 15, 1985, p. 60.
3. Leavenworth Times, June 18, 1985, p. 10.
4. Berry, Wendell. "Whose Head is the Farmer Using?" *Meeting Expectations of the Land*, edited by Wes Jackson, Wendell Berry, Bruce Colman. North Point Press, S.F. 1984, p. 1.
5. Justpax (USCC), June 1, 1985, p. 1.
6. Kansas City Star, May 26, 1985, p. 9D.
7. Heffernan, William and Judith, "Survey of Families Leaving Farming," University of Missouri-Columbia Cooperative Extension Service, April 1985, p. 7-8.
8. Kansas City Star, July 29, 1985, p. 7A.
9. Valley Falls Indicator, May 15, 1985, Editorial.
10. A Pastoral Letter on Agriculture Crisis in the State of Kansas. February 19, 1985.
11. Ibid.
12. Catholic Social Teachings and the U.S. Economy. Draft published in *Origins*, May 23, 1985.
13. Ibid.
14. Heffernan, op. cit., p. 5.
15. Orwell, George, "1984," New American Library, 1983, p. 7.
16. Washington Newsletter, National Farmers Union, August 9, 1985.
17. Berry, op. cit., p. 30.

Traverse Log



From the intermittent gabble of the world's social din, a question is emerging with increasing clarity, "Will the real God please stand up!"

Basic analyses for studying the current multi-sourced quandry is furnished by Jim Panoch, now of Florida. His case is:

Every society has a behavioral structure proceeding from assumptions,—to codes,—to laws. Assumptions are what people sense and accept by faith to be reality as they perceive it. They show meaning to life. A code, usually unwritten, is the rationale developed which provides the basis for laws and rules. Laws are the framework of society. Each society must operate on one set of laws, although the individuals therein may hold different (but related) codes and divergent (but compatible) assumptions.

The assumptions must be reasonably compatible for the laws to be identical and, therefore, functional in the society. The notion that everyone can step to the beat of a different drummer is valid only with the assumption that all are marching in the same direction. No group can march in all directions at once! But the nature of the assumptions is irrelevant to the process. Any assumption will do.

Our problem lies in the source of the assumptions. Whoever has the wisdom of a quick answer to this could make a sucker out of Solomon. Some people believe that assumptions are derived from principles that need to be invented. Even the idea that there are no absolutes is predicated on at least one assumption that is absolute.

Most people on the planet Earth agree that there are absolutes—usually furnished by some deity. Those people who accept the "pre-existing absolutes concept" seldom agree on what those absolutes should be. And of course, the crowd that "invents" absolutes characteristically lands in a muzzy area where meaning is questioned.

If this noise continues, society will not. Society is faced with limiting the range of operative assumptions, Panoch insists.

We are not going to settle the matter here. But one point of reference that seems to stand out like a flamingo in a farmyard is: What helps the survival of society is basically determinant. Last August in commenting on the 40th anniversary of the dropping of "the world's most terrible weapon," editor Dolph Simons wrote that it remains easily "the most compelling argument for the constant quest for the firm establishment and dedicated maintenance of peace on our globe."

I'll bet that is one absolute that would find common and wholehearted acceptance. It may be "discovered" or "manufactured" but it certainly springs from the need of society. Basic need may be the workshop where theology is being made!

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