

Crooked timber

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [Nov 01, 2000](#) issue

As we collect ever more evidence about times past and places afar, we find that there seem to have been no times or places when or where environmental edens existed (at least not since the original Eden). There seem to be no classes or cohorts of people who live or lived according to the romantic and nostalgic images we sometimes hold—images suggesting that at some time, somewhere, everyone practiced ecologically sound ways of life, respected others and avoided hierarchy, and leaders led without asserting dominance and power.

Before I get mail pointing to this or that individual, cult or small group as absolutely pure, let me say that we are here talking about civilizations, cultures and societies. Let me also say that my motive is not to detract attention from the noble few who set examples on which we can draw.

During the past third of a century, where have we been asked to turn to find examples of purity? Typical answers: The white men killed all the buffalo and trashed the environment; go to the Native Americans to see ecological perfection exemplified. Or, men messed things up; go to the women, the matriarchies of the past, to find gentility and egalitarianism in action. Or, the prophetic and scriptural traditions caused harm; go to the ancient pagan ways when witches and wizards taught respect for the earth and for others.

The truth is that some individual Indians and some tribelets did speak well and do well in respect to earth and animal; many women have outdone many men in caring for others; many followers of scriptural traditions have exploited and despoiled the environment. But recent findings by archaeologists, anthropologists, social scientists, historians and philosophers have begun to present a more balanced picture—a picture that forces us to question the possibility of finding earthly edens.

Respect life like the Native Americans did? Now we have found evidence of human sacrifices on thousands-of-persons scales among pre-Columbian Aztecs. The evidence of fecal remains points to a cannibalism not restricted to ritual observance but part of the regular diet. We have found convincing indications that Indians were

complicit with whites in killing off the buffalo, as well as their friends and relatives.

As for matriarchies, unless I am missing something, we are not finding any places where -archies of any sort avoided the temptations of power. Anarchy has not done it. Matriarchies, when and if we find them, will not live up to our romantic images of them. As for the paganism exemplified by Wiccans today, we find that most of what Wiccans proclaim was invented during the 20th century, and most of their claims for the ancient witch religions are not grounded in fact.

The point is not that civilized white male (or female) Judeo-Christians invented and monopolized the means of exploiting the earth and other people. Nor is it that they were “better” than other people, whatever that would mean.

What I would like to suggest is that by whatever name one calls it, something like original sin afflicts both individuals and societies. Reinhold Niebuhr was, in the main, right about that. But neither he nor we use that description of reality to paralyze or promote cynicism. It simply suggests that in the real world we do best not to imagine edens or perfect beings but to deal with what Immanuel Kant and Isaiah Berlin called “the crooked timber of humanity.”