

Notes on a Christian Ecological Ethic and Economics

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I sometimes receive requests for an overview of scriptural/theological concepts which undergird a Christian ecological ethic. So I have created below a brief overview and summary of some of the content I often cover. I hope it is helpful to you in your presentations and conversations and writing. Do feel free to e-mail me with your own additions and thoughts, with the content that you raise in your work. I can be reached at mschut@episcopalchurch.org.

In addition, I have included below a few thoughts about economics and how economic systems embody certain worldviews and are undergirded by a certain theology. Again, this is very much in summary form.

Review of Theology (which connects to the following economic discussion)

- Dominion as service: In Hebrew culture, kings had dominion; they were understood as exercising dominion. However, that can be expressed in different ways. A good king in Hebrew culture was understood as one who exercised dominion with mercy, justice, and compassion. That was the connotation of the word. In addition, Christians speak of Christ as King, as one who has dominion. Yet Christ said he did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life. He exercised dominion as service.
- Relatedly, Genesis 2:15: Humans were put in the garden to (as it is often translated) “till and keep” it. The word till in Hebrew is “*abad*”, which literally translated means “to serve.” The same word is found in Joshua, “As for me and my house we will serve (*abad*) the Lord.” The word *shamar* is translated as keep. A good translation, apparently, but the connotation of the word is to keep physiologically (for example, keeping a cucumber in the garden, in relationship to soil, air, water (with all that keeps it alive and healthy) -- rather than keeping a cucumber in a pickle jar on the shelf. *Shamar* is found in the Aaronic blessing: The Lord bless you and keep (*shamar*) you.
- Sabbath: As found in Leviticus 25, the land was to lay fallow every seventh year, to have its rest. The language is strong as God tells the Israelites they will be removed from the land if they do not provide for the land's rest. Every fiftieth year the Jubilee was to be practiced -- where land was to return to its original family which would prevent the accumulation of land in any one person's hands. To dismiss the Jubilee because Israel perhaps never really practiced it is like saying we should dismiss Jesus, because we've never fully practiced following him.
- Of Christ as one who reconciles all creation. John 3:16, uses the word the Greek word *cosmos*; for God so loved the *cosmos* (not only humanity, as is often understood or implied in the verse). In Colossians 1:15-20, Paul describes Christ as the one in whom all things hold together... and also proclaims Christ as the one in whom "all things" are reconciled -- again, not only humanity.
- Imminence: Western theology has emphasized God's transcendence, but our tradition also has a strong sense of God's presence with us (Emmanuel). We talk about having Christ in our hearts. Paul, in speaking to the Athenians, says I will now speak to you of the God "in whom we live and move and have our being." It's as if we are swimming in God's presence.

- Incarnation -- God becoming human. What could proclaim more powerfully that matter, the body, matters. That earth matters. Both imminence and incarnation strongly support the truth that all creation is very good, is sacred and an expression of who God is and how God cares for us.
- Fruitfulness: We know that humans are given the commandment to "be fruitful and multiply." But, often overlooked, is the fact that the first creatures given that commandment are the birds and the fish (see Genesis 1:22). Species extinctions are occurring at a rate not seen since the disappearance of the dinosaurs. Scientists say that current extinction rates are 1,000 to 10,000 times the natural (background) rate of extinctions. Those extinctions are caused by us, through habitat destruction, the introduction of invasive species and so on. In a sense, extinctions prevent other species from fulfilling their God-given mandate to be fruitful and multiply.
- Of course the Psalms are full of hymns of praise in which all creation praises God, humans along with trees and mountains and streams and clouds and rain...all have a place in the choir.

Calvin DeWitt's book *EarthWise* is good on the above sort of topics/content. For more theologically oriented content see writers like Sallie McFague, John Cobb, Larry Rasmussen, and Wendell Berry...

Our Economic System Is Based on a Story

Our economic system embodies a certain story, a certain theology and worldview.

When facilitating this discussion, I draw the circle of nature's economy and the line of our current dominant human economy (which Wendell Berry calls "industrialism"). An overview diagram of those economies is found in two of my books. Please see page 77 of *Money and Faith: The Search for Enough* and page 263 in *Simpler Living, Compassionate Life: A Christian Perspective*.

The circle of nature's economy:

- "waste" equals food
- draws on local resources
- the only external input is solar energy so the system is essentially a closed system, recognizing finiteness
- creates and values unique communities (other-than-human are part of those communities)
- individuals are persons-in-community (John Cobb); we are part of the body of Christ
- God is immanent (not only transcendent)
- creation is sacred

The line of the current dominant human economy:

- labor, capital, and resources (basically, God's creation) are fed into the production line (input) and lots of "stuff" is produced (output)
- waste equals "negative externalities"
- draws on resources from anywhere and everywhere -- does not really recognize creation's finiteness
- communities are valuable if they are 1) resources for production; 2) markets for consumption; 3) waste dumps for the externalities

- individuals are "consumers" or individuals-in-a-market (John Cobb)
- God is transcendent
- creation is no longer sacred or imbued with inherent value

To Remember:

1. Never Diminish the Importance of the Faith Community
 - a. Gus Speth, one of the world's most respected environmentalists, currently serving as Dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, recently said in a talk, "I used to think the top environmental problems facing the world were global warming, environmental degradation and eco-system collapse, and that we scientists could fix those problems with enough science. But I was wrong. The real problem is not those three items, but greed, selfishness and apathy. And for that we need a spiritual and cultural transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that. We need your help."
 - b. Harvard ecologist (and leading intellectual of the last century) EO Wilson uses the term "biophilia" to describe his understanding that we are hardwired to love life. Many of us are separated from that internal connection with creation -- healing that separation will be a crucial part of moving toward a sustainable lifestyle and economy. Religious faiths can help heal that separation.
 - c. The Consortium of Endowed Episcopal Parishes -- recently identified "bio-empathy" as a crucial leadership quality of future church leaders.

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