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CHRISTIAN RESPONSIBILITY

IN THE NORTH

Toward A Biblical Environmental Ethic

Ralph L. Moellering

Jesus Christ identified himself with the cause of the lonely, the forsaken, and the oppressed. As Christians who acknowledge him as Lord, it becomes an inescapable part of the cost of our discipleship to come to the assistance of those who may be the victims of exploitation. As trustees of the biblical legacy, we need to be fully conscious of its emphasis in the Scriptures on God's concern for the dispossessed and the outcasts.

Spokesmen for the major churches in Canada expressed it this way in 1973: "We stand in the biblical tradition of the prophets where to know God is to seek justice for the poor and the oppressed . . . The Church cannot remain silent on the political and social issues of the day if it is to claim obedience to Christ and his message of 'good news to the poor.'" ¹

THE PIPELINE DEBATE — A CASE STUDY

Undoubtedly, the most hotly disputed and most widely publicized issue confronting Canadians during 1977 has been the proposed pipeline to

1. Quoted in *Justice Demands Action*, a statement presented to the Prime Minister and members of the federal cabinet by Canadian church leaders. March 2, 1976.

transport natural gas from the Mackenzie Delta and from the North Slope of Alaska. Debate included consideration of the proposed pipeline's manifold repercussions and implications for the benefit or detriment of all of the people involved. What is the concrete meaning of justice when applied to decision-making in respect to the land claims of the inhabitants of the Northwest Territories? What is truth when we evaluate the conflicting claims of environmentalists and industrialists? What is right and what is wrong? Arguments and counter-arguments pitted small organizations like the Alberta Energy Coalition against the massive conglomerates which pressured for permission to plunge ahead with their plans for development.

Speaking at Inuvik on April 26, 1977, Canadian Arctic Gas Pipeline Limited vice-president, J.A. Harvie, fervently remonstrated against those who oppose the pipeline. He categorically repudiated any suggestion for a moratorium of up to twenty years to provide the native people with an opportunity to settle and implement a land claims agreement, thereby establishing control of their own destinies. He expounded his own version of the prevailing situation and what he conceives of as good and desirable in the days ahead.

Mr. Harvie expressed doubts that the northern native people really want what the antagonists of the pipeline say they do. "What," he asked, "about the Metis people who told Mr. Justice Berger that they want to participate in and benefit from the development associated with a pipeline and delta gas production?" To bolster his contention further, he referred to the native people of Coppermine who said, "They don't want to lose the jobs they have in petroleum exploration." Hundreds of native people, he claimed, "have demonstrated their desire for wage employment by working on present petroleum exploration activities."

Granting that they are correct in affirming that the urge for self-determination is universal, he went on to argue that self-determination includes "the right to seek a job." The clincher in this line of reasoning is to inquire: "How is self-determination achieved by precluding development which can help expand the range of choice and opportunity available to northern people?" In addition, this spokesman for Canadian Arctic Gas intimated that "in the absence of long-term jobs associated with the pipeline" the people in the north would suffer economic hardships and be reduced to dependence on welfare. "An exploding population," he maintained, "is already too large to successfully live off the land."

Mr. Harvie further tackled the problem of cultural identity, a major plank in the platform of those who profess to abhor the consequences of unwarranted intrusions into the north -- acts which undercut or demolish inherited patterns of life and value systems. In his view the changes contemplated are inevitable. It is therefore foolhardy and futile to attempt to resist them. It is sheer romanticism and naive sentimentalism to imagine that you can turn the clock back to the nineteenth century or freeze the status quo. It is absurd to presume that cultural identity could be preserved in "an economically stagnant north."

With his hard-hearted version of realism, Harvie insisted that cultural identity must be understood as "the anchor of stability, which enables people to cope with, adjust, and survive the difficult process of change." With the

premise that benefits accruing from the technology of the white man's world incontestably represent a "change to something better," he summarily dismissed the allegations of those who have resisted development and who have proposed a twenty-year moratorium on the pipeline. The appeal made to natives was that security for their own future could be assured only by supporting Canadian Arctic Gas in its objectives -- objectives which included the promise of jobs with monetary remuneration.²

The speech at Inuvik was only one expression of an irritation felt and a complaint voiced by numerous people in government and business for some years over what they construe as unwarranted interference in their immediate and long-range planning for the north. Nevertheless, a formidable coalition of opposition to the pipeline had arisen and become increasingly vociferous. The battle for a Mackenzie Valley pipeline moratorium fused together a bevy of influential churchmen, university professors, students, journalists, and other concerned Canadian citizens to make common cause with environmentalists and native rights' "activists."

The new movement stood in flat contradiction to the assumptions and rationale of government and industry spokesmen. Facts and figures were assembled by direct inquiries and investigations. With utterly different convictions than those of their detractors, they projected a new and almost revolutionary vision for a transformation of basic values in our culture. They articulated alternative proposals which they believed would be much more auspicious for the future welfare of everyone. These "converts" were likely to be heard speaking of a new Western World order of conservation as opposed to consumerism; of human liberation as contrasted with corporate oppression; of responsibility to "our Third and Fourth World sisters and brothers," rather than submission through default and apathy to late twentieth century forms of colonialism.

The protagonists of these positions drew parallels between their struggle and what took place in the sixties and early seventies in the fight within the U.S.A. against the Vietnam War and the Nixon administration. Some of the zealots in the anti-pipeline struggle questioned the basic economic and ideological presuppositions which stimulated the whole history of North American expansionism. They saw North Americans goaded on by profit-hungry corporations to acquire more household appliances, more equipment to enjoy recreational facilities, and more status symbols of various sorts. They decried the extravagance, the wastefulness and the lack of concern about what it might mean for future generations. Could it be that smaller and less could replace larger and more as attractive-sounding adjectives? Could we not learn to be satisfied with much less and actually be more happy?¹³

Much of the anti-pipeline movement seemed to be found in small but not ineffective groups -- often socialist, liberal (with a small "l"), and Christian -- in their orientation or motivation. Three key organizations were at the core of the

2. Reported in *Edmonton Journal*, May 5, 1977.

3. cf. E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful, Economics as if People Mattered* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973). Schumacher's proposals, especially for an "intermediate technology," have sparked a lively ongoing debate.

movement: 1) the Committee for Justice and Liberty Foundation (CJL), a Toronto-based Christian group; 2) the Ottawa-based Southern Support Group for the N.W.T. Indian Brotherhood; and 3) Project North, an interchurch agency spearheaded by Hugh McCullum.

Why all of this "nay saying" to the multinational corporations and their affiliates and allies? Why the moral crusade for a moratorium? Hugh and Karmel McCullum together with John Olthuis, in their book on the subject, contend that "We must take the time to engage in the painful, but liberating experience of living instead of being coerced."

In recapitulating their arguments they write: "We have the time: to develop a national energy policy based on human growth, not simply economic expansion, -- to settle land claims in Northern Canada, justly and in a manner appropriate to the first people of the land, based on their perceptions of their own future, -- to restore and safeguard our diseased environment, -- to decide to switch to alternative sources of energy based on renewable, rather than non-renewable resources, -- to adopt a less energy-intensive life-style based on conserver, rather than consumer principles, -- to begin the transition from high capital and energy-intensive production systems to more labour-intensive systems, -- to hold public inquiries into the competence and independence of the National Energy Board, the actual amount of Canada's non-frontier fossil fuel reserves, and all aspects of the petroleum industry operating in Canada, with a view to making certain that public resources are developed for the public benefit and not the private enrichment of the petroleum industry."⁴

ETHICS AND NATURAL RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

All the while, the theological task looms before us. We search the Scriptures, our historic confessions and contemporary religious thought. We seek to correlate the quest for human justice with our most profound convictions about ultimate reality and the will of God.

One starting point might be to reassess the environmental crisis in relation to northern development, as well as to capitalistic and socialistic expansionism all over the globe. Gigantic companies -- most of them American -- have invested billions of dollars in the quest for more oil and gas in the far reaches of the north. They have done so with the expectation that most of this oil and gas can eventually be transported to southern markets in Canada and in the U.S.A. Is this development really essential for the well being of our people? The answer depends on one's view of what ingredients comprise the "good life." Is the need merely "to provide cleaner heat and better light, to provide more horsepower for our cars, to turn on our gadgets, to maintain industry that provides goods and services that in turn contribute to our affluent comfort -- and whose indiscriminate use produce incredible waste?"⁵ We are

4. Hugh and Karmel McCullum and John Olthuis, *Moratorium, Justice, Energy, the North and the Native People* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1977), pp. 195-196.

5. Hugh and Karmel McCullum, *This Land Is Not For Sale* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1975), p. 26.

reminded that Canada and the United States are ranked as the highest consumers of energy in the world at the present time. With little more than 6.5% of the world's population, North Americans deplete more than 43% of the energy currently available on the entire planet. Even more deplorable, we cause more than 40% of the earth's industrial pollution. It is further estimated that no less than 48% of all energy we use is needlessly dissipated.

Overpopulation and industrialization have combined to tarnish the idyllic picture of the Psalmist as he surveys God's magnificent deeds in the realm of nature and exalts, "Thou visited the earth . . . Thou greatly enrichest it" (Ps. 65:9a). With compulsive consumption and incessant greed, we have squandered our God-given resources and blighted the good earth.

The human being is intended to be both a child of God and a child of nature. He can achieve satisfaction only as he lives in harmony both with the Creator and with his fellow creatures. According to Genesis, as soon as the primeval couple disobeyed the divine mandate they experienced the repercussions in the natural order; the ground was cursed as thorns and thistles made labour tedious. Matter is intrinsically good, but it has been infected by man's evil doing. The violation of God's laws is not limited to theft and murder; it includes upsetting the balance of nature -- depleting resources for destructive wars and private enrichment.

"The time has come," Russell Train wrote in the Protestant publication *Tempo*, "to treat crimes against the environment on a par with crimes against society."⁶ The solid wastes of our technological civilization mount skyward. The president of the American Public Health Association described people in the U.S.A. as "standing knee-deep in refuse, shooting rockets to the moon."⁶ The combustion of fossil fuels and the elimination of vegetation combine to produce changes in the oxygen-carbon dioxide balance of our atmosphere. Some scientists fear that our global climate could be drastically altered with adverse effects for everyone -- possibly even making further life impossible.

We are all dependent on God's provision for our preservation and sustenance. Unless selfish exploitation is curbed and an ethic of mutual cooperation is adopted, we may find that Isaiah's forewarning of desolation has been fulfilled: "The earth is utterly laid waste . . . the world languishes and withers. . . the earth lies polluted -- a curse devours every living thing" (Is. 24:3).

But restitution can be made. Change is possible. And faithful Christians can lead the way through their emphasis on the biblical doctrines of stewardship and discipleship in the light of the cross. When the threat of ecological disaster was first publicized, *Time* magazine and other popular journals quoted an article by Lynn White, Jr. in which he blamed the Christian Church for the environmental crisis. "Christianity," he wrote, "in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions . . . not only established a dualism of man and nature, but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends . . . By destroying pagan animism,

6. Quoted in Ralph L. Moellering, "The Environmental Crisis and Christian Responsibility," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol. XLII, No. 3 (March, 1971), 179.

Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects . . .”⁷

This interpretation is an utter distortion of the truth. God’s command to subdue the earth and have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth is not a blank cheque. Man has no license for ruthless devastation or conspicuous consumption. Man is only a temporary caretaker of whatever he uses for his nurture and well being.

In both the Old and New Testaments God is portrayed as the Supreme Owner and Distributor of everything which exists. “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof,” the Psalmist proclaims. “Every beast of the field is mine and the cattle on a thousand hills . . .” (Ps. 24:1a). Man stands in a creature relationship to God. According to the parables of Jesus, he must give an account of how reliable and how competent he has been in utilizing what has been entrusted to his safekeeping. The kind of crass materialism which saturates our present-day society comes under the indictment of the Sovereign Ecologist. “What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?” (Matt. 16:26). “It is written,” Jesus rebuked Satan, “man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4).

Sensual delights and the accumulation of wealth are not the sum total of what is desirable. Apart from a firm commitment to God in Christ, expressed in love and concern for people and a wholesome environment, life can become empty and drab. Personal sacrifice may be necessary for the reclamation of the earth. We may be compelled to give up luxuries and conveniences to which we have become accustomed. In confronting these challenges to our way of life, we can find our inspiration in the sign of the cross. In terms of the paradoxical teaching of Jesus, we may lose our life through self-indulgence; we may save our life through self-denial.

As much as possible, it is mandatory for Christians to endeavour to make the vision of a New Jerusalem a present reality -- even while we await its completion beyond time and history. What remains to be said is that our commendable determination to enhance the quality of our life must be translated into specific, concrete acts of reparation and advancement. Getting the facts and disseminating educational information are prerequisites for effective action. Churches and schools can sponsor teach-ins with films, speakers, and literature. As individuals, Christians can be examples to their neighbours and associates by starting with simple and obvious steps like salvaging aluminum cans and newspapers, refusing to buy products in disposable containers, forming car pools and eliminating wastes wherever possible. Even to renounce our fascination with superfluous gadgets would be a move in the right direction.

A balanced ecology, of course, will never be attained without political action. Pressures will have to be exerted. Boycotts will have to be organized against

7. Reprinted in Garrett DeBell, ed., *The Environmental Handbook* (New York: Ballantine, 1970), pp. 82ff.

the corporations which contaminate our air and water. Agitation for remedial measures in every community will have to be deliberately instigated. Strategic coalitions will have to be formed which can elect candidates who champion a healthy environment. The automobile industry must be required to accelerate the production of cars which use less fuel, an alternative to the internal combustion engine. All the while, the mammoth problem of a burgeoning population will have to be dealt with on many fronts.

CONCLUSION

Mark Hatfield, the U.S. senator from Oregon who is known as a devout evangelical Christian, asserts that if we are "identified truly with Christ, we will find ourselves serving the oppressed of the world -- the victims of injustice and sin. We will begin to look at the structures of society from the vantage point of the poor."⁸ There are limitations to the amount of land and resources available. This is true even in Canada, though this country is far from having the overpopulation problems which cause such negative prognostications in many other parts of the world. There must be a concerted movement among sensitized Christians for a more equitable distribution of the national wealth, with special generosity toward the natives in Canada and with a readiness to share with deprived people all around the earth.

8. Mark Hatfield, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1976), p. 217.