

## Ethical Issues in Eco-Justice within Western Culture<sup>i</sup>

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I am pleased to have an opportunity to address such weighty issues as ethics, justice, and culture within the context of global ecology with this group of thoughtful people. Typically, ecological issues are addressed in the morally and socially sterile environment of chemistry, biology, and economics. And as Dr. Phil would ask: “How has that been working for us?” The answer: “It hasn't.” An ongoing ecological crisis is building toward a global ecological collapse.

You don't have to accept my opinion in this matter; after all, I'm an economist. Gustave Speth, founder of the World Resources Institute, co-founder of the Natural Resource Defense Council, advisor to Jimmy Carter & Bill Clinton, and author of *Red Sky in the Morning*, wrote in his *Bridge at the Edge of the Earth*, “All and all, today's environmental movement has not been succeeding. We have been winning battles, some critical ones, but losing the war.”<sup>iii</sup> A variety of ecological indicators, ranging from water use to greenhouse gas emissions to global biodiversity, indicate an acceleration of the trend toward a global ecological catastrophe. Speth has concluded the environmental movement has been systematically depleting its resources in battles over specific details of environmental issues and policies that fail to address the root problems.

The ecological crisis is rooted in questions of culture, ethics, and justice, not in the science of chemistry, biology, or economics. The failure of the environmental movement is a reflection of its unwillingness to address the root causes of the ecological crisis. A primary cause is the persistent unwillingness of Western culture to address the ethical issue of social equity and justice in our relationships with nature. One of the dominant metaphors of Western culture is that of humans being separate or apart from nature, or the earth, over which they have dominion or control. Western culture fails to recognize that crimes against nature are actually crimes against people – not just an abstract “humanity” but real people. Even though the links between our ecological actions and their human consequences are often complex and widely dispersed across space and time, crimes against nature are nonetheless crimes against people.

The concept of eco-justice represents an attempt to link the concepts of ecological sustainability and social justice. Ecology is the study of nature. However, ecology and economics share a common origin in the ancient Greek word, *oikos*, which refers to the household. Eco-justice has remained largely an abstraction that views humans and nature as intertwined elements of God's creation. Eco-justice asserts it is impossible to care for the earth without also caring for humanity. Perhaps it would be more compelling if the emphasis were reversed. It is also impossible to care for humanity without caring for the earth. Perhaps then our relationships with the earth would be seen as personal rather than abstract. Anything we do that diminishes the health and well-being of the earth diminishes the health and well-being of real, flesh and blood people – if not here and now then somewhere at sometime in the future.

Eco-justice is a matter of ethics: not just ecological ethics but also human ethics. One of the most fundamental requirements of justice is that no person should benefit at the expense of another. Justice demands that no person be forced to bear the costs of another person's pursuit of economic self-interests. The primary purpose of human culture is to ensure liberty and justice for

all. However, social justice must take priority over individual liberties. No person has a right to act in ways that deprive others of their basic right to social equity and justice. Justice is essential for the overall good of society – for the common good. A fundamental responsibility of culture is to protect the common good from individual exploitation or degradation. Western culture has failed in this responsibility, as least as it applies to relationships between people and nature.

The concept of culture first emerged in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. It was related to cultivation or improvement, as in agriculture and horticulture. Cicero apparently was the first to relate cultivation of the soul with the agricultural metaphor when he used "*cultura animi*" to describe the development of a "philosophical soul" – the highest level of human achievement. The word culture today is often used interchangeably with civilization. When Gandhi was asked what he thought of Western civilization, he replied, "I think it would be a good idea." Western culture has failed to cultivate its "philosophical soul" so as to accommodate our evolving understanding of our relationships with the earth – with God's creation.

This failure is not just a failure to protect God's creation, in some abstract sense, or ensure the future of the human species. The failure has very personal consequences. Our dependence on fossil energy should serve to illustrate the personal nature of our relationship with nature. Dozens more should come readily to mind. Ultimately everything of any use to us is derived from energy of one kind or another. We are addicted to one kind of source of energy: cheap fossil energy.

When we think of the ecological consequences of our dependence on fossil energy, we probably think of environmental catastrophes such as the wreck of Exxon Valdeze in Alaska, or BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. We probably think of the pollution of the ocean and the resulting loss of wildlife and destruction of fisheries and estuaries. Or we may think of coal fired power plants and the air pollution and acid rain that results in losses of forests which provide habitat for wildlife and help control flooding and soil erosion. We might also think of new oil from the tar sands of Canada, and be vaguely aware of environmental impacts, including huge emissions of greenhouse gases, destruction of wildlife habitat, and the negative impacts to air and water quality. We think of the destruction of God's creation and God's creatures, and we are outraged, at least for a while. But then, we leave our air conditioned homes, get in our SUV – or maybe our Prius – and drive across town or to an airport for another trip across the country.

We don't likely think much about the people who will become ill and die because of contaminated sea food or from drinking polluted water or breathing the polluted air. The environment is filled with so many pollutants we will never know for sure what made them sick or killed them. We probably don't think of fishermen or women in Alaska or in the Gulf area who have lost their livelihoods and life's work as a consequence of such ecological disasters. We assume they will be compensated for their economic losses. But, they cannot be compensated for their lost way of life, their culture, or their way of making a living. We probably don't think of the health and well-being of oil field workers in Alberta Canada or people in the surrounding communities. We assume they are making "big money" from new oil, but they are also creating a Canadian Appalachia. We probably don't think of those real people of the future who will suffer decades of illness, grinding poverty, and depravation because we want cheap fossil energy.

Eco-justice is about meeting the needs of the future as well as the needs of the present. It's difficult to think of people of future generation as real people. When we allow coal companies to blow the tops off of mountains to get to the last remnants of coal beds, we are not just destroying God's creation; we are threatening the lives of real people who may be poisoned by the pollution of Appalachian streams for centuries to come. When we allow the bedrock in Pennsylvania to be fractured and filled with poisonous chemicals to squeeze out the last remaining pockets of natural gas, we are not just destroying God's creation; we are poisoning the aquifers that real people of future generations may need for their drinking water. We are making the earth inhabitable for future generations of real people. And, when we accept nuclear energy as an alternative source of "clean energy," we will be creating mountains of radioactive wastes that may threaten the health of people for as long as there are people left on earth.

We live in a society that is behaving like an alcoholic who has run out of booze after the liquor stores are closed. We are scrounging around in the earth's trash cans for a few remaining drops of fossil energy that we might have overlooked while we were on our drunken binge. We may think about the impacts of our actions on God's creation, but we are not thinking of the impacts on our "neighbors." Jesus said we should love our God with all our strength, all our heart, and all our soul, but added we should also love our "neighbors" as we love ourselves. Do we really think He meant only our neighbors in our own communities? Do you think He really meant to exclude those of future generations from his "neighborhood"?

Eco-justice demands that we think about our impacts on the environment not just in terms of the abstract concepts of caring for humanity or for God's creation but also as caring for real flesh and blood people of both present and future generations. Eco-justice, like authentic sustainability, applies the Golden Rule across, as well as within, generations. It asks us to do for those of future generations as we would have them do for us, if we were of their generation and they were of ours. It's not just an ecological matter; it's a social, personal, ethical, moral matter.

Certainly, our degree of respect for the Creation is a direct reflection of our respect, or lack of respect, for the Creator. Furthermore, the Bible, in Matthew 25, states "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." "For I was hungry, and you gave me meat, I was thirsty, and you gave me drink: I was a stranger, and you took me in." What does this say about us depriving future generations of clean water, or destroying the soil they will need to produce food, or killing those different from us to gain access to their oil? As we have failed to care for the least of these, we have failed to care for our Creator.

People ask me if I am optimistic about the future. My standard response is that I am not optimistic, but I am hopeful. I believe we are better people than the last few decades would indicate. I also believe the churches have a major responsibility to guide Western civilization back to a path of rightness and goodness. We don't have to debate the philosophical issues of whether other species of the earth have rights. We know humans have a right to basic justice; no one should be allowed to benefit at the expense of another. We also know we have an ethical and moral responsibility to treat people with respect and compassion, as we would like to be treated. These are foundational principles of Christianity. If Christians aren't willing to make them part of a new Western Culture, then who will? My hope is for an eco-justice revival in America, a commitment of God's people to care for all of God's people, as well as God's creation.

## End Notes

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<sup>iii</sup> James Gustave Speth, *The Bridge at the Edge of the World* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2008), p vii.