



Environmental Concern and Economic Justice

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Our world is headed towards ecological catastrophe. The delicate balance of the earth's small and fragile biosphere, which makes it a home to millions of species and subspecies of animals and plants both aquatic and terrestrial, is dangerously threatened. All ecosystems around the world and their life supporting and generating structures—atmosphere, water, soil, species agency—are under severe stresses.

The atmosphere has sustained extensive damage: ozone depletion,¹ global warming,² air pollution,³ and climatic changes. Oceans, lakes, and rivers are turned into sewers from industrial waste while underground water reserves are poisoned by “leachate”⁴ and nitrite from chemical fertilizer. The soil has also suffered extensively from erosion, salinization, desertification, and compaction.⁵ Finally, the biosphere is rapidly diminishing: thousands of species of plants and animals, many not yet known to us, are becoming extinct.⁶

¹Ozone depletion, according to C. Dean Freudenberger (*Food for Tomorrow* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984] 19), is caused by “aerosol propellants and refrigerants, stratospheric aviation, nitrogen oxide gases from surface exhausts, the oxidation of inorganic nitrogenous fertilizers, and increased use of nitrogen-fixing leguminous plants.”

²*Our Common Future*, World Commission on Environment and Development (New York: Oxford University, 1987) 33, 172.

³John Carmody, *Ecology and Religion: Toward a New Christian Theology of Nature* (New York: Paulist, 1983) 16-19. Outdoor air pollution according to Carmody is constituted by the destructive presence in the troposphere of such pollutants as “carbon oxides, sulfur oxides, nitrogen oxides, hydrocarbons, photochemical oxydants, particulates, inorganic compounds, radioactive substances, heat, and noise.”

⁴John E. Young, “Discarding the Throwaway Society,” *Worldwatch Paper* 101 (January 1991) 16. “Leachate” is the name given to “an often-toxic soup of rainwater and decomposing waste leaking from landfills and slipping into groundwater.”

⁵C. Dean Freudenberger, *Global Dust Bowl: Can We Stop the Destruction of the Land before It's Too Late?* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990).

⁶*Our Common Future*, 147-167.

There has been a lack of consensus among environmentalists concerning ecological thresholds, the real cause of the crisis, the best way to solve it, and the time still at our disposal.⁷ All agree, however, that (1) “environmental stresses are linked one to another,” (2) “ecosystems do not respect national boundaries,” (3) “environmental stresses and patterns of economic development are linked one to another,” and (4) “environmental and economic problems are linked to many social and political factors.”⁸

Thus, for instance, outdoor air pollution, caused by excessive use of carbon-based energy

sources, when heated by solar radiation intensified by the ozone depletion, exacerbates global warming and its consequences in the atmosphere (climatic precipitation, increase of temperature) and on the planet surface (rise of sea level and flooding of lowlands, drought in other areas). The fact that environmental degradations do not respect national boundaries should be a warning to us that any hostile action taken against the environment anywhere in the world, whether by affluent or poor economies, will have profound adverse effect on the biosphere.

The aim of this article is not to frighten us into inaction or to drive us into cynicism, but to discuss the present ecological crisis in the light of what our faith in Jesus Christ authorizes us and liberates us to do. First, we will reflect on the impact of economic development on the environment, identifying the causes of ecological degradation. Second, we will discuss the ramifications of “the downward vicious spiral of poverty,” a problem that environmental limitations pose for economic development.⁹ In the course of these discussions, we will address the issue of the ideological use of environmental concerns as an economic weapon against less developed nations, as well as the ideological use of social and political factors as an explanation of environmental stresses. Finally, we will attempt to look into possible theological moorings for political economic ethics that take seriously the integrity of the earth’s biosphere.

I. THE IMPACT OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ON THE ENVIRONMENT

As we ask ourselves what sharing in Christ’s history in the world authorizes us to do, we need to take seriously Bob Hulteen’s remark that “environmental activism devoid of Justice is naive and ineffectual, and Justice-seeking work without concern for the Earth is narrow and short-sighted.”¹⁰ Environmental activism works at reversing ecological degradation by challenging and fighting practices hostile to the environment and by nurturing a new way of life based on environment-enhancing values. It is true that some “enviroactivist” groups have been eclectic and symptomatic in their approach to the ecological crisis. The different movements, such as “Save the Spotted Owl,” “Save the Elephants,” or “Save the Rain Forests,” though relatively successful in achieving projected ends, have neglected economic justice issues and thus inflicted great economic stress on grassroots workers whose

⁷Richard D. N. Dickinson, *To Set at Liberty the Oppressed: Towards an Understanding of Christian Responsibilities for Development/Liberation* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, Commission on the Churches’ Participation in Development, 1975) 10.

⁸Ibid., 37-38.

⁹Ibid., 5.

¹⁰Bob Hulteen, “The Greenhouse Effect and the White House Effect,” *Sojourners* (Feb - March 1990) 4.

livelihood depends on their ability to hire out their labor and skill.¹¹

One must concede, however, that in many instances, environmental activism has been successful in slowing down environmental deterioration by raising public consciousness, by tactical sabotage, or, in some cases, by pushing the adoption of environmental protection measures into state laws. In recent years, environmental concerns (both in political platforms and actual candidate performance) have played a decisive role in the success of political campaigns.¹² Recycling household waste and conserving energy have become, for many, a respectable way of life.

More and more, environmental activists are addressing systemic issues, underscoring linkages between human agencies and ecological degradation. In the industrial world, in market-regulated as well as state-run economies, overuse of carbon base energy sources, overproduction of consumer goods in a “throwaway” society, and production of instruments of mass destruction at the expense of more useful and life-enhancing commodities have all been identified as symptomatic causes of the crisis. In developing countries, poverty caused by overpopulation and its overexploitation of natural resources, continuing civil wars, and government incompetence and corruption have been blamed for an ecological degradation of the same proportion as that of the industrial world.

Although these assessments may be correct as far as symptoms go, they are naive and prone to ideological misuse if they shy away from unveiling the systemic causes of the crisis. To aim only at changing the individual lifestyle of the affluent without addressing national and international economic development patterns and their role in forming human values and affecting social and political conditions would indeed be naive. Unless environmental activism touches the root causes of activities hostile to the environment, regardless of their magnitude, by challenging the anti-ecological orientation prevalent in the Western world, environmental destruction will simply be delayed but not avoided. On the other hand, blaming social and political factors in developing countries without addressing the perverse links of economic development they have with the world market economy would indeed be ineffectual. It would not help reverse the trends of deforestation, soil erosion, desertification, atmospheric pollution, and climatic precipitation already underway in many developing countries.

Poor nations, whose rate of reproduction outstrips their rate of production, are often blamed for the population crisis. The solution usually proposed, mostly by industrial nations, has been effective *population control*, mainly in the form of subsidized contraceptive devices and enforced sterilization.¹³ An on-going heated debate has ensued. Is the population crisis the cause of poverty and overexploitation of natural resources in developing countries, or are they the result of unequal development at international, national, and local levels?¹⁴ Is population the main problem or is it the dominance of an unsuitable development pattern worldwide?

¹¹Ibid. Hulteen writes: “As long as the image of ‘enviroactivists’ remains that of people who go after the Eskimos and the Brazilians who barely eke out a living, there will be no consensus. And there will be hostility between the peace and justice community and environmental activists.”

¹²Though this is true of most North Atlantic countries, it is more visible in the United States.

¹³Jack A. Nelson, *Hunger for Justice: The Politics of Food and Faith* (New York: Orbis, 1980) 129.

¹⁴For more discussion on population, poverty, and ecology, see Roger Lincoln Shinn, *Forced Options: Social Decisions for the 21st Century* (New York: Pilgrim, 1982) 85-104; and also *Our Common Future*, 95-117.

Jack A. Nelson, in his book *Hunger for Justice*, argues that a distinction between *overpopulation*, *surplus population*, and *rapid population growth* must be made.¹⁵ Of these, surplus population leading to rapid population growth best describes the population crisis in developing countries. There is overpopulation when the development goal of a nation is aimed at the total population, but does not achieve its end on account of the excess number of people. When the development goal of a nation is aimed at serving the interests of national or foreign elites, a whole reserve of superfluous or surplus population is created. This is the case in all developing countries, where superfluous population, which is systematically forced out of good

arable land by agribusiness, mining, or industrial complexes, struggles “to eke out a subsistence on land too steep to farm.”¹⁶ These are the people who push their ways into rain forests, slashing and burning, and destroying thousands of animal and plant species annually. The rate of population growth among the surplus population is tragically due to the fact that, when poverty becomes systemic, people begin to see their children as a means of economic security.¹⁷

The real issue, therefore, is not that developing countries endanger the balance of the biosphere by excessive consumption of natural resources, for industrial populations consume and squander world resources at a rate many times greater than that of developing populations.¹⁸ Rather, the issue is about developing nations’ economic practices which are based on an eccentric, extractive, and perverse economic system which is hostile both to the environment and the poor. Their economies are *eccentric* in that they are outward-looking and subservient to the interests of central economies; they are *extractive* in that they are dependent on the export of raw materials; and they are *perverse* in that commodities for export are produced at high ecological and social cost but sold at a very low market price. The market system requires developing countries to increase export productions at the expense of their already overstressed ecosystem, and also forces them to run the risk of flooding the market and lowering commodity prices. Living on the margins of this perverse system, masses of impoverished populations engage in extensive subsistence farming, creating dust bowls as they move on. As Bob Hulteen has noted, any environmental activism which does not address such injustice—ecologically and economically speaking—is indeed naive.

Questions come rushing in. Why do developing countries put up with this system? Can’t they raise the price of their commodities and form cartels like the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to stabilize the market? Why don’t they diversify their exports and become less vulnerable to market fluctuation? Why don’t they simply “exit” from the system and direct their economy towards the benefit of their own people and their environment? These questions move us to our next point.

¹⁵Nelson, *Hunger for Justice*, 115-125.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid. See also Jacques Loup (*Can the Third World Survive?* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1983] 4), who says, “The accelerated growth of population was mainly due to the rapid and unexpected decrease in mortality in all these countries.” One should also note that after independence, when poverty remained systemic but health care was vastly improved, almost every born child lived. This contributed to rapid population growth.

¹⁸Murray Bookchin, “Death of a Small Planet: It’s Growth That’s Killing Us,” *The Progressive* 53 (1989) 22. See also John E. Young, “Throwaway Society.”

II. THE IMPACT OF ENVIRONMENTAL STRESSES ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

According to the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), there is a destructive interaction between economics and ecology that takes the shape of a “vicious downward spiral of poverty.”

Poor people are forced to overuse environmental resources to survive from day to day, and their impoverishment of their environment further impoverishes them, making their survival ever more difficult and uncertain.¹⁹

The roots of this spiral of poverty “extend to a global economic system that takes more out of a poor continent than it puts in it.”²⁰ The reality facing developing countries is that their ability to achieve economic growth is now severely limited by the degradation of their ecosystems. The dilemma facing the world is that as poor nations continue striving for economic growth following the course set by capitalistic development patterns, they will strain those ecosystems beyond their threshold. The metaphor for the world that this ethical crisis evokes is certainly not that of a lifeboat,²¹ an image which suggests that the best solution is to let the poor drown in their poverty. A more appropriate metaphor, rather, is that of an ocean liner. If the lower deck has taken in water, the first class passengers cannot dismiss the problem as not concerning them. With this issue and this metaphor in mind, we can now return to the question stated earlier, namely, Why don’t poor nations “exit” from the world economy or try to influence the world market to their benefit?

What the condition of developing countries requires is the achievement of rapid economic development to provide for the basic needs of the whole population without further straining the environment.²² What things are necessary for this to happen? The Sixth Special Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1974 suggested the creation of a New International Economic Order (NIEO). The Assembly further called for “reductions in trade barriers, more stable commodity prices for raw materials, easier access to foreign technologies, better terms of aid, and rapid expansion of industrialization.”²³ These proposed measures, considered necessary by leaders of developing countries to achieve sustainable development, were opposed by powerful nations as radical, though, in fact, they were still too conservative to be effective.²⁴ The condition in which developing countries presently struggle to hold on to their peripheral position is aptly assessed by the WCED in these terms:

Trade barriers in the wealthy nations—and in many developing ones—make it hard for Africans to sell their goods for reasonable returns, putting yet more pressure on the ecological systems. *Aid* from donor nations has not only been inadequate in scale, but too often has reflected the priorities of the nations giving the aid, rather than the needs of the recipients....As a consequence of the “*debt crisis*” of Latin America, that region’s natural resources are now being used not for development but to meet financial obligations to creditors abroad.²⁵

¹⁹*Our Common Future*, 27.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 6.

²¹Shinn, *Forced Options*, 71-73.

²²*Our Common Future*, 40.

²³Nelson, *Hunger for Justice*, 163. See also *Our Common Future*, 67-91.

²⁴Nelson, *Hunger for Justice*, 163.

²⁵*Our Common Future*, 6. Italics added.

Leaders of the World Council of Churches have argued strongly that justice for the poor on whose back the burden of the “debt-trap” rests, demands a radical transformation of the world economic system and not simply a mild reform within the market system. Thus the WCC Commission on the Churches’ Participation in Development Advisory Group on Economic Matters, formed in 1978, called for the establishment of a “just, participatory and sustainable

society” worldwide.²⁶

The group proposed that developing countries be enabled to “delink” from economic centers and establish a self-reliant, inward-looking economy, an economy aimed primarily at the well-being of the whole population and at enhancing the overstressed environment. But the question of debts remains troublesome. How can poor nations embark on an inward-looking economy and pay their debts at the same time? When leaders of these nations have pleaded for a moratorium on interest payments, they have been met with the dilemma that, if debts are not serviced, no new assistance is forthcoming. Worse yet, countries which tried to “delink” from the centers (e.g., Mozambique, Angola, Nicaragua) became the targets of political destabilization by Western-backed insurgents.²⁷

Inward-looking, self-reliant economies would drastically reduce the stress on the environment as government policies focused on human development, land reform, and environmental enhancement. Realistically speaking, however, many developing countries do not have the resources and technology to achieve rapid economic development without destroying the environment. The world economic system as a whole must move toward a sustainable pattern of development, while at the same time supporting the efforts of developing nations to restore their environment. This means that affluent nations should now be conscious of the debts they owe to the environments of those countries formerly colonized by them—environments which bore the brunt of their primitive capital accumulation.²⁸ Payment of these debts should come in the form of debt cancellation and new economic and technological assistance. The United States policy of pressuring the World Bank not to fund development projects that are not environmentally friendly, while not addressing economic justice on the world scale, amounts to its simply trying to solve the ecological crisis at the expense of the poor.²⁹

Formerly-colonized environments can no longer withstand the pace and strain of economic growth exacted by the present world capitalist market. If there must be economic growth for the poor nations—and there must be—it has to be technologically based,³⁰ that is, providing by means of an “efficiency in technological inputs”³¹ that produces more with less. The ecosystems of these former colonies have sun, wind, and water aplenty. Alternative energy technologies will not only restore these ecosystems to their life-generating capacity but will bring liberation

²⁶Marcos Arruda, ed., *Ecumenism and New World Order* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, Commission on the Churches’ Participation in Development, 1980), passim.

²⁷See Penny Lernoux, *Cry of the People: The Struggle for Human Rights in Latin America* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980) and Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *War against the Poor: Low-Intensity Conflict and Christian Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989).

²⁸Such language is not simply symbolical. There is actual debt or unpaid cost on all the raw material extracted from developing countries and bought at a price which did not take into account the restoration of the environment.

²⁹Norman Meyer, “Environment and Security,” *Foreign Policy* 74 (Spring 1989) 41.

³⁰*Our Common Future*, 52-53.

³¹Cf. Brian Griffiths, *The Creation of Wealth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984) 23.

to these economies as well.³² The liberation of developing nations, therefore, is intertwined with the liberation of the biosphere; injustice to one is suffered by the other.

III. THEOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL REFLECTION

Is such a vision too radical for the industrial world to contemplate? It would certainly seem so. In an article entitled “Death of a Small Planet: It’s Growth That’s Killing Us,” Murray Bookchin identifies the root cause of the ecological crisis as an anti-ecological orientation prevalent in Western society.

We do not simply live in a world of problems but in a highly problematical world, an *inherently* anti-ecological society....Perhaps the most obvious of our systemic problems is uncontrollable growth....It is...an inexorable material reality that is unique to our era: namely, that *unlimited* economic growth is assumed to be evidence of human progress.³³

The practices characterizing an anti-ecological approach to economic development are based on the perceptions that (1) natural resources are abundantly unlimited; (2) nature is capable of healing and replenishing itself without human agency; and (3) immediate human needs override concern for the needs of other species and the well-being of the ecosphere itself. These fundamental perceptions of humanity’s relation to the ecosphere explain extravagance in consumption and a pattern of wastefulness that betrays an economic doctrine of unlimited growth, the systematic “rape” of the environment for economic gain, and the lack of consideration for the biosphere when weighing decisions regarding the initiation or implementation of war.

The roots of this anti-ecological orientation are seen by Dean Freudenberger to coincide with the *Enlightenment*, the so-called liberation of the Western mind from religious tutelage and superstition, with which the birth of the view and practice of economy as the creation of wealth is to be identified in the West. It was in this period, when “Man” asserted himself to be “the measure of all things,” that slave trade and colonialism began.³⁴ In Western philosophy as well as in theology, nature was seen only as the stage upon which the human drama unfolds. Physicists conceived of nature in mechanistic terms, while historians viewed history as the account of human progress or civilization, which was in turn measured by human transformation—rather manipulation—of nature. Christian theology, singling out the Gen 1:28 “dominion” account, saw nature simply as instrumental to the self-realization of the *homo faber*, the created co-creator who uses nature as a means of participation in God’s on-going act of creation.³⁵ When such a mechanistic and instrumental perception of the world is provided with a technological base, humanity’s relation

³²Christopher Flavien and Nicholas Lensen, “Beyond the Petroleum Age: Designing Solar Economy,” *Worldwatch Paper* 100 (December 1990).

³³Bookchin, “Small Planet,” 19-23.

³⁴Freudenberger, *Global Dust Bowl*, 26.

³⁵See the anthology *Co-Creation and Capitalism: John Paul II’s Laborem Exercens*, ed. John W. Houck and Oliver F. Williams (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1983), in particular, Stanley Hauerwas’ article, “Work as Co-Creation: A Critique of a Remarkably Bad Idea.” He writes: “While I am certainly not suggesting that the Vatican should underwrite the ecological romanticism so prevalent today, at the very least the Pope should have felt some discomfort with any theological legitimation of the arrogance of our species’ superiority and correlative assumption that we have the right to rape, or as John Paul puts it, to ‘master’ the world” (pp. 46-47).

to nature becomes one of domestication and exploitation, with nature's sole purpose being to support the creation and acquisition of wealth.

Along with the anti-ecological “doctrine” of unlimited growth in a limited ecosystem, Bookchin also speaks of the perverse impact of market mentality on all areas of life. The whole global village has become, as it were, a vast shopping mall. Our whole way of life, including thought processes, personal relationships, and moral values are all measured by marketability.³⁶ As the market becomes the “measure of all things” in post-modern society, unbridled acquisitiveness, cut-throat competition, rugged individualism, an adversarial attitude, and arrogance are transforming the human community into a predatory society. A caution from the book *Habits of the Heart* is apropos here: “It has been evident for some time that unless we begin to repair the damage to our social ecology, we will destroy ourselves long before natural ecological disaster has time to be realized.”³⁷

Where would humanity find the rational maturity and political economic will to outgrow its obsession with the notion that “having” is the essence of one's being? I would like to propose a biblical orientation in which economy is viewed as the creation of *shalom*—an activity of mutual interdependence which aims at creating a “just, participatory, and sustainable” world community. In such an economic pattern, cooperation not competition, mutual empowerment not acquisitiveness, a deep sense of belonging not individualism, enhancement of the environment not the volume of material production, are among basic values expressing human maturity, liberation, and faithfulness to divine justification by grace.

This *shalom*-creating economy is not a utopia—meaning nowhere existent. It is the image of the triune grace of God—the economic Trinity: mutual self-giving, mutual empowerment, mutual sending-forth. Life as *shalom*—abundant, creative, overflowing—takes place only where there is mutually “shared otherness.” Moreover, this life is overflowing in the sense that every “other” empowers and gives away the “beloved” to create *shalom* for that which is other than God. Thus the Father and the Spirit give away the Son, the Father and the Son give away the Spirit, and the Son and the Spirit give away the Father. What God cherishes the most, God offers to the world as God's gift of grace to create *shalom* for the world. This “sending forth” of the beloved includes everyone that God receives through baptism.

It is a humbling experience to learn that the “non-human” world—for lack of a better term—has already as always enjoyed and celebrated this image of divine triune grace of “shared otherness.” An example of this *celebration* of the divine image can be seen in the community of life of the lichen. C. Dean Freudenberger writes,

Lichens are formed by symbiotic relationship between two different kinds of plants: fungi and algae. The fungi contribute something and the algae contribute something and together they both thrive in what may be the world's most basic community.³⁸

Together with the rock on which it lives the lichen creates soil, “thus making the rest of plant and animal life possible.”³⁹ When we look at the world around us, is

³⁶Bookchin, “Small Planet,” 19-23.

³⁷Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New

York: Harper & Row, 1986) 283-286.

³⁸Freudenberger, *Global Dust Bowl*, 52.

³⁹Ibid.

there any creature which has not been touched by God's creative grace, which does not exist as a gift for others? The ecosystem as a whole reflects the beauty of God's gracious sharing of otherness.

Environmental activism can indeed be naive and ineffectual unless it challenges and seeks to change the perverse economic orientation prevalent in the world today. Faith in Jesus Christ authorizes us and liberates us to be faithful to our "giftedness." In so doing it empowers us to challenge the anthropocentric, consumerist view of creation, which has produced injustice and destruction, and to be effective as God's gift to work for the establishment of a *shalom*-creating economy in this world and in this generation.