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Foreward

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This second volume of The Journal of Faith and Science Exchange comes as Western societies and the global order that they have helped to shape arrive at the beginning of a new millennium. A dominant concern of those in the natural sciences, as well as the social sciences, is that of fostering an ethical order in the years that lie before us. It is the function of the schools that compose the Boston Theological Institute to prepare students for ethical leadership in society, primarily through religious and voluntary institutions. Leadership of this kind requires clearly articulated goals which have been thoughtfully developed, a moral integrity that reflects those goals, and the will to pursue these ideals. This volume symbolizes an attempt to foster such vision and to encourage the kind of work required of religious leadership.

For example, one of the overriding issues facing us in the new millennium is that of environmental practice and how it will shape our conceptions of consumption and population policy. Ethics in this domain is clearly being worked out in relation to scientific knowledge (facts) and religious reflection (values). These categories are two parts of a whole that frame the way we view and maintain sustainability within the environment. The historical era into which we are moving challenges us to formulate a new ethic appropriate to the task before us. The need for additional approaches to the kinds of issues raised in this volume on the part of society at large, government agencies, and among churches and other voluntary agencies has become clear, particularly in relation to global economic structural concerns. Earth’s capacity to meet human demands for natural resources and, equally, its ability to absorb the waste produced by human activity, is reaching its limits. In addition to the kind of integration between science and religion that is required, the following strategies (among others) might be suggested.

First, better long-range thinking is necessary to meet the environmental challenge. This requires a cross-cultural scope because the nature of the problem is global. The search for a global ethic for environmental security and economic sustainability has implications for human rights. Any transnational thinking requires interreligious considerations. This is particularly true for reflection on The Earth Charter, which seeks to identify the core values and principles that should guide global environmental conservation and sustainable development. The discussion entails derivative questions about human rights in the context of an emerging global politics, which demands that we move beyond the patterns of national interest that have dominated political thought at least since the Peace of Westphalia (1648). It draws in definitions of development that affect economic well-being and reflect indigenous and other religious worldviews. The discussion entails the value of all sentient life and picks up the issues raised by “deep ecology” or “eco-philosophy.” These are issues that require good science, as well as good reflection on the nature and origin of our values, traditionally matters of faith or religion.

Secondly, further thought needs to be given to the meaning and use of technology. “Ecology” has to do with all living species, habitats, and ecosystems; “environment” has to do with the human social, economic, and material context for life. Yet the terms are often used without discrimination or are collapsed into each other, interfering with our understanding of culture and nature. It is the premise of most theorists that the way we live in relation to these categories is both

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the locus of the problem, as well as the solution. Politics and disputes about the meaning of environmental degradation become directly involved in the implications of economic action and technical deployment.13 Our sense of the meaning and use of technology is directly related to our understanding of the meaning of human activity in the world. How we think about ourselves is reflected in the development—creation—and use of technology. Again, these are issues that draw us to the concerns of this journal.

The metaphor that seeks to tie together many of the religious traditions as they approach global sustainability is that of stewardship. Embedded in Semitic tradition and developed variously, this image emphasizes the relational context in which humanity stands with respect to the rest of nature.14 Stewardship neither gives way to depressive determinism nor becomes overly optimistic about the spheres of human freedom open to us in the future.15 It demands as full a knowledge of the natural world as can be discerned.

And finally, in the movement toward equity in consumption and population within the parameters of global sustainability, what encouragement is there for those who have more to give to those who have less, particularly in light of human competitiveness? The answer requires a metaphor for human self-identity and behavior such as that implied by the idea of stewardship. Without such a metaphor to relate us to God’s creation, any idea of a Jubilee Year, Sabbath Restitution, or Islamic Order, as conceived in our different religious traditions, will never be realized.

Works cited:


**Endnotes:**

1. On the role of ethics with respect to sustainability, see Engel and Engel. See also Crocker and Linden. See the debate over Act theories of ethical reflection which deny the necessity of rule theories, whether teleological or deontological, in Rosen.

2. Whyte, p. 52.

3. Ethical reflection in the churches of the twenty-first century must move more profoundly beyond the three tendencies identified by Paul Albrecht over the past seventy-five years: 1) an ethic of agape going back to the origins of the Life and Work Movement (Stockholm, 1925); 2) a participatory and populist ethic with an overriding concern for those oppressed through racial, religious, or sexual identity; and 3) liberation theology, guided by a Marxist “science” in matters of praxis with a preference for the poor. See Albrecht.

4. See, for example, Rasmussen; van der Brent; Hallman


6. World Commission on Environment and Development, Brundtland Report. The Report notes the rapid deterioration of the global environment as threatening human life on earth. It seeks to delineate approximate and possible ways to deal with environmental issues. It stands for: 1) meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs; 2) creating a
sustainable situation for all countries; and 3) a concern for equality within and between generations, not just physical sustainability. This was the third in a series of UN reports, following the Brandt report North-South (1980) with its sequel Common Crisis (1983) and the Palme report Common Security (1985). It deals with major problems like the greenhouse effect, deforestation, soil loss, the debt crisis, the global commons, and the explosion of cities.

7. See Küng.

8. See Leslie. He insists that environmental issues are the national security issues of the twenty-first century. See also Huntington, pp. 130-35.

9. See Rockefeller.


12. See Sylvan and Bennett. See also Skolimowski, p. 54. He develops an ecological humanism as an alternative to industrial society which sees: 1) stewardship as a prevailing metaphor for human activity in the future, 2) the world to be best conceived of as a sanctuary in a religious sense, and 3) knowledge to be defined as the intermediary between us and the creative forces of evolution.

13. I am following Goldblatt here.

14. See Coward, Part II, a survey of different religious traditions, pp. 63-194. See also Hall, pp. 103-21. In developing his ideas on stewardship, Hall contends that a form of Christian Humanism that transcends the theocentric as well as the older Liberal perspective (faulted for its assumptions about humanity and history and failure to provide an acceptable theology of nature) must be pioneered. In order to enlarge our vision of the full ramifications for stewardship, he cites the following five principles: globalization, communalization, ecologization, politicization, and futurization (pp. 122-54). See the modified or “weak” anthropocentrism of Holmes Rolston.

15. In referring to the potential latent in the metaphor of stewardship, Hall writes that as Martin Luther’s vision of a justifying grace enabled people to overcome a sense of medieval guilt and thereby find the courage to live, so too “the sense of being stewards of earth and of life itself could provide a generation of world-weary and apathetic survivors some feeling of purpose” (Hall, p. 7). See his comments about the history of the book, first published in 1982, with reference to the emergence of the “Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation” process in the World Council of Churches (xii). A helpful study guide is available to Hall’s understanding of stewardship, written by J. Phillips Williams. Other metaphors include those of “frugality” and “mercy.” On the former, see Nash; on the latter, see George H. Williams.

The Reverend Dr. Rodney Petersen, Executive Director of the Boston Theological Institute, teaches courses in the member schools in the fields of history and ethics. Previously he taught at the Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (Deerfield, Illinois), Webster University (Geneva, Switzerland), and worked with churches in France and Eastern Europe. His books include Christianity and Civil Society (Orbis, 1995). With Audrey Chapman and Barbara Smith-Moran, he edited Consumption, Population, and Sustainability: Perspectives from Science and Religion (Island Press, 1999), and produced the companion video, “Living in Nature.” With his oversight, together with the many faculty members of the BTI schools who have pioneered in this field, the BTI offers a Certificate Program of Study in Religion and Science.