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Daniel C. Maguire

Marquette University, daniel.maguire@marquette.edu

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Whom the Gods Would Destroy, They First Make Myopic Religion and Ethics in Cross-disciplinary Ecological Dialogue

DANIEL MAGUIRE

A GUARDEDLY HOPEFUL PROGNOSIS

There is a distinct possibility that our human species, the first life form on this planet to achieve thought, may be terminally ill. We may be fatally flawed, destined for only a short tenure in this privileged little corner of our universe. But, summoning resolve, I will begin on a strained but modestly hopeful note. Then, and only then, will I make the painful plunge into an analysis of the human international, multi-disciplinary myopia that may be our undoing, just as it has already contributed to the undoing of myriad species on this gifted planet. But first, the determined reach for hope.

In our day the three primal violences have been uncovered. Sexism, its cousin heterosexism, and that other form of violence, called militarism, have been diagnosed. They haven't been cured, but they have been spotted and seismic plates are crashing in church and state as we address them. Panic abounds quite understandably, as we dare to rearrange the stubbornly tenured bases and biases of intelligent life on earth.

Male and female were we made, with many variations on those dyadic themes. The problem was we tried to run the world monadically; we perversely opted for a male-run world on the macho model, and it hasn't worked. It has been waggishly and wisely said that if Lehman Brothers had been Lehman Brothers and Sisters, it would not have failed. Complementarity is at our core. From the chromosomes on up we find difference, not sameness, at the center of our being. Enforced sameness corrodes both epistemology and life and all the disciplines used to study life. We don't know or live well when one brand of monadically constructed gender dominates. Vive la difference is the key not just to erotic relationships but also to thought, to politics, to science, and to social well being.

Maleness and femaleness have both been distorted because you cannot distort just one half of a correlative. The constructed male model finally challenged by feminism is marked by gravitational leanings toward violence. This demoralized model corrupted everything—including all the metaphors—in its path. Caring, engendering, reciprocity, interdependence, compassionate relating....all of these got squashed:

In this violent macho mindset “problems are assaulted, not solved.; diseases are defeated, not cured. We wage war on illness and social problems.

A killing is made in the stock market. The Christian cross becomes a triumph, and God a mighty fortress. The system is to be beaten and the frontiers of knowledge pushed back. Even poetry is called a raid on the inarticulate. Business language smacks of the terrors of the hunt; you must corner the market, wipe out the competition, and see that the bull displaces the bear.¹

The long regnant macho hegemonic penchant also imported a strong hierarchical instinct, a proneness to pernicious abstractionism (in which dead children are called “collateral damage”), a bias for consequentialist bottom-line thinking, and of course a hatred of women and all that was “feminized” including “mother nature.”²

But now, subject to all the perils of tender new shoots breaking through resistant clay, a basal cultural critique is claiming its place. The Macho Emperor is being seen in his unflattering nakedness. Men are slowly being freed to learn from women. Women, of course, have been scarred but they still have much to teach us about at-home-ness with bodily existence, about integrating mind and affect. Women’s alienation has also given them insight. Draw a circle and cut me out of it and I will become keenly observant of what goes on in that closed circle. In this early-on parturition of a new consciousness, heterosexuals can stop fearing and instead learn from sexual minorities, welcoming instead of fighting the diversity which makes for the rich mix of life. Ethnic animosities are visited with cleansing sunlight, while the buttresses of nationalism are beginning to crack from the excess weight put on such structures of divisiveness. View the earth from outer space, and you see no borders. Myopic orthodoxies are being de-credentialed as the passport into real interdisciplinary conversation and truth-seeking. To paraphrase Yeats, a wonderful beauty is being born.

And yet...

APOCALYPTIC FOREBODINGS

With a kind of chilling calmness, Swedish scientist George Henrik von Wright says: “One perspective, which I do not find unrealistic, is of humanity as approaching its extinction as a zoological species. The idea has often disturbed people....For my part I cannot find it especially disturbing. Humanity as a species will at some time with certainty cease to exist; whether it happens after hundreds of thousands of years or after a few centuries is trifling in the cosmic perspective. When one considers how many species humans have made an end of, then such a natural nemesis can perhaps seem justified.”³

Other dismal choristers join in this fearsome *pathetique*. Vaclav Havel warns that the battered earth might dispense with us in the interest of a higher value,

1 Daniel C. Maguire, *Whose Church? A Concise Guide to Progressive Catholicism* (New York: The New Press, 2008), 38.

2 Ibid., 27-48.

3 Quoted in Goran Moller, *Ethics and the Life of Earth* ((Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 1998), 35.

that is, life itself. Biologist Lynn Margulis observes that the rest of earth's life did very well without us in the past and it will do very well without us in the future. And New York University physics professor Marty Hoffert adds: "It may be that we are not going to solve global warming, the earth is going to become an ecological disaster, and somebody will visit in a few hundred million years and find there were some intelligent beings who lived here for a while, but they just could not handle the transition from being hunter-gatherers to high technology. It's entirely possible."⁴

According to Carl Sagan, the twenty-first century is the most dangerous century in the 4.5 billion year history of this planet. No single discipline will have all the answers to meet the needs of earth and its many life forms. Multi-disciplinary attention is essential, not optional. Sagan poses this epochal interrogative: "It is clear that the Earth will be here a thousand or a million years from now. The question, the key question, the central question—in a certain sense the only question—is, will we?"⁵

A stark conclusion presses upon us: *if current trends continue, we will not.*

So how is this thinking species that dubs itself *sapiens* and an *animal rationale* responding? Haltingly, spasmodically, with half-hearted velleities, not with full blooded volitions.⁶ There is a growing realization that no one discipline will come up with the answers to turn things around. We need to marshal and coordinate all possible wisdom sources. There are calls for "philosophical dialogue" and "collaborative science" and "integrated research across disciplines."⁷

That is heartening but it won't be easy. Interdisciplinary work encounters the fiefdom-adolescent-gang-formation-syndrome that operates in the academe. Arnold Toynbee noted late in his career that "the study of human affairs is, in truth, monolithic. The dissection of this mental monolith into the so-called 'disciplines' is, at the best, a convenient operational device, while, at its worst—that is to say, if it is taken as being a reflection of reality—it is a distortion of the truth." When our disciplines are taken too seriously, and when hostile jargons divide us, the result is "academic warfare" and quarrels that are "foolish, perverse, and inimical to true knowledge and understanding."⁸ Not a bad description of the modern academe but a fair warning for interdisciplinary efforts to address our terracial proclivities.

ETHICS AND RELIGION IN THE SHADOWS

Added to the occlusion problem of the disciplines in gated communities,

4 Quoted in Elizabeth Kolbert, "Annals of Science: The Climate of Man—III," *New Yorker* (May 9, 2005), 57.

5 Carl Sagan, *The Varieties of Scientific Experience*, Edited by Ann Druyan (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006), 211.

6 See Daniel C. Maguire, *Ethics: A Complete Method for Moral Choice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1010, 98-101, on "Velleity and Volition."

7 Sanford D. Eigenbrode, et al, "Thinking of Biology: Employing Philosophical Dialogue in Collaborative Science," *Bioscience* January 2007, vol. 57, No. 1.

8 Arnold J. Toynbee, *Change and Habit: The Challenge of Our Time* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 88-89.

there is an even more radical failing. The ongoing ecocide has both moral and religious dimensions. Indeed the *moral* and the *religious*, properly understood, are ubiquitous categories within whose circumference all the disciplines function, knowingly or not. Ethics is the effort to discern systematically what befits and benefits human and all terrestrial life. Religion, whether theistic or non-theistic, involves the discovery that there are values that emerge in the life phenomenon that merit our highest encomium, *sacred*. The sacred is not a peripheral or add-on category. There is no one who considers nothing sacred. As historian Daniel Pals says, religious ideas, usually not understood as such, “affect our literature, philosophy, history, politics, and psychology, and indeed almost every realm of modern thought.”⁹

Realistic social theory cannot ignore power and the fact is that nothing so stirs the human will as the tincture of the sacred. As John Henry Newman said people will die for a dogma who will not stir for a conclusion. Small wonder then that thirty-four renowned scientists led by Carl Sagan and Hans Bethe, in their “Open Letter to the Religious community,” urged religions to attend to the plight of the planet. “Efforts to safeguard and cherish the environment need to be infused with a vision of the sacred....Problems of such magnitude, and solutions demanding so broad a perspective must be recognized from the outset as having a religious as well as a scientific dimension.”¹⁰

Unfortunately the modern Western intelligentsia are chary and wary about both ethics and religion. Much of the blame for this falls on ethicists and religion scholars who have not defined themselves and presented their distinctive methodologies so as to win entry into the broader academic conversations on human and terrestrial good. Indeed in some of the social sciences the very word “theological” is a pejorative, signaling a mythological and data-shy mindset.

In a study of religious scholars’ recent efforts to define their discipline Catherine Bell says the field suffers from a “crisis of identity” making “the professional study of religion muddled and uninformative.”¹¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith notes that there is “a bewildering variety of definitions [of religion] and no one of them has commanded wide acceptance.”¹² Maurice Bloch thinks that the “only solution seems to be to abandon the notion of religion as an analytical category.”¹³ Stewart Guthrie takes the problem to its historical roots: “Writers have speculated on the nature and origins of religion for well over two thousand years but have not produced so much as a widely accepted definition. Instead, there are nearly as many definitions as writers. Religion is difficult to define because definitions imply theo-

9 Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 9.

10 Carl Sagan, Hans Bethe, et al, “An Open Letter to the Religious community,”(1990), available from the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, <http://www.nrpe.org>.

11 Catherine Bell, “Modernism and Postmodernism in the Study of Religion,” *Religious Studies Review* 22 (July 1996), 179.

12 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: The New American Library, 1962), 21.

13 Maurice Bloch, “Religion and Ritual,” in *The Social Science Encyclopedia*, ed. Adam Kuper and Jessica Kuper (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 698.

ries and no good general theory of religions exists.”¹⁴

Can a field that cannot define itself command attention?

DEFINING RELIGION

There is a delicate marvel on the face and edges of the earth. It is fragile and precarious. Weight-wise it is almost insignificant since it weighs less than one billionth of the weight of the entire planet. The likes of it is found nowhere near us in the cosmos. Its survival here is not certain and that is our concern because the name we give to this precious and delicate phenomenon is *life*. The systematic effort to protect and enhance it is called Ethics. “The name we give to our response to the preciousness we find in life is Religion, a preciousness so great that it elicits from us our supreme encomium, our ultimate superlative, *sacred*.”¹⁴

Religion, definitionally, is the response to the sacred. The sacred is the term we give to that which we find most precious; we use the word holy to express the same experience. It is an affective mystical experience that theistic religions explain by reference to God as the ground of all being. Non-theistic religions, also imbued with a deep sense of the sacred, a deep reverence for life and its ultimately ineffable value (Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism) express the experience in different rituals and symbols. Thus the experience of the sacred is not a monopoly of theists. Indeed it is the foundational experience that grounds all morality.¹⁵

Ethics and religion are twinned. What enhances life and its milieu we call moral: its mysterious and awe-filled grandeur we call holy. Some religions conclude to one or many divinities at the root of this grandeur; other say theistic conclusions short-circuit our sense of wonder and detract from the miracle that is life itself. Whatever the explanations of sacrality—theistic or not—the fact remains that the experience of the good and the holy are concentric—or more simply, the sacred is the nucleus of the good.¹⁶

The perception of the sacred is often institutionalized in what we come to call world religions. These religions are culture-shaping powerhouses, filled with symbols and narratives and heroic figures that permeate human life and always have in one form or another. No world religion is a complete success story. Error and madness slip into the stirred imaginings of that which we call sacred. And yet each of these religious behemoths, enriched by centuries of experience, is in its way a classic in the art of cherishing.

These storehouses of human experience also house stern warnings about the human capacity to trash the life that came to us as such a mysterious gift. How apposite appear the words of the Hebrew scriptures to our current ecological mess. If you do not behave wisely, we are told “your land shall not yield its produce nor

¹⁴ Stewart Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 8.

¹⁵ Howard Coward and Daniel C. Maguire, *Visions of a New Earth: Religious Perspectives on Population, Consumption, and Ecology* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 1.

¹⁶ Idem.

the trees of the land their fruit” (Lev. 3-6: 19-20). “The land shall be dried up, and all who live in it shall pine away, and with them the wild beasts and the birds of the air; even the fish shall be swept from the sea” (Hos. 4:3). These writers would not have been surprised at the 2010 oil mess in the Gulf of Mexico or the melting of polar ice. They knew we had it in us to assault our earthly matrix.

Four-fifths of the world’s population affiliate with one or another of the world’s ten thousand religions. No serious study of the human plight can ignore these religions which do so much to shape—for good or for ill—the identities and vision of the human denizens of the earth community.

DEFINING ETHICS

“Ethics is the art/science which seeks to bring sensitivity and method to the discernment of moral values.”¹⁷ More simply, ethics is the discipline that seeks to know what does and what does not enhance life in its benign forms. (Not all of life is benign.) It is the effort to find out what is good or bad for us and for our host earth. And ethics has a distinctive methodology, distinguishing it from other forms of social analysis and study.

Ethics is not a dictator. It is a mind-expanding, questioning art that brakes the blind momentum fueled by unasked questions and untested assumptions. In my book *Ethics: A Complete Method for Moral Choice* I seek to fill a need by offering a method that allows no unasked questions and employs all nine principal ways in which the human mind opens itself to moral intelligence. Next this method explores the hazards of moral discourse that can trip us on the way to moral truth. With all or any of that undone, human behavior crashes. Healthy ethics also opens the mind to the awe and wonder that is the root of all morality. “Well done, ethics is the cure for squinting narrowed eyes fixed on texts and tasks while losing the ecstasy of wide-eyed wonder. It is the cure for an arid technopolis, where the prizing of beauty withers and where art and poetry lose their saving, life-expanding allure. The perception of beauty may be the crown jewel of human intelligence.”¹⁸ It is also at the root of moral perception.

Why is ethics ignored or disparaged as a legitimate academic and human enterprise? Partly that is due to ethicists who take you on tours of things like utilitarianism, deontology, teleology, and the unapplied thoughts of long dead men (and few women), but do not define ethics or tell you how to do it in a way that addresses all of life’s challenges and quandaries. But more than boring ethicists are at fault.

A trip to the library of Amherst college gives the clue. If you look at the 1895 catalog of courses, you will find Ethics described in the very first page of the Course of Study. The grand prose used to describe it show that it was considered the capstone of the entire educational process. No one unsophisticated in moral inquiry could wear the cap and gown. But just 10 years later in the catalog of courses ethics has lost its prime listing and has been reduced to an elective for sophomores! Even sophomores can avoid it. This is a seismic and fatal cultural

17 Daniel C. Maguire, *Ethics: A Complete Method for Moral Choice*, 5.

18 Ibid.

shift and the culprit I would name is scientism. Science is good as a positive extension of our native creativity. Scientism means freighting science with questions it cannot answer. So impressed were we with the marvels of science we stopped asking the moral question such as how should we do what we can do...and should we do it at all?

One result of this cultural exodus from ethics has been a rash of self-designated “ethicists” or “business ethicists” who don’t understand ethics as a discipline but do have a keen interest in certain moral matters in those areas. Thus many who come to be called bioethicists or business ethicists are trained in other fields, such as medicine or sociology, but could not pass a graduate exam in ethical methodology. When ethics was demoted from its academic position this promiscuous use of the term “ethicist” was invited.

Science severed from ethics is a monster. It allows us to create the end of the world and store it in our nuclear silos and submarines. A hundred thousand chemicals, most untested for toxicity for humans, permeate our soils, water, and foodstuffs. Human breast milk often contains more toxins that are permitted in dairies—and take note, some toxins are permitted by dairies. Human bodies at death often contain enough toxins and metals to be classified as hazardous waste and human sperm counts worldwide have fallen by 50 percent since 1938, while science helps us double baste the planet with CO₂, melting mighty glaciers and ancient ice caps.¹⁹

Science without ethics makes us like a stupid fetus devouring the womb that bears us. It makes us, the thinkers in nature, the enemy of the rest of nature, with the sorry result that right now the rest of nature would be far better off without us.

DELUSIONS OF INFINITE EXPANSION?

All the disciplines rallying feebly to respond to human death-dealing are already bonded by shared assumptions, many of them dangerously wrong. Assumptions control arguments like tides control and carry waves. False assumptions can carry brilliant arguments to ruin. The detection of false assumptions is job one in all disciplines. Buddhism is rich in false-assumption-diagnosis. It targets three human weaknesses, all of which are in play as we address our battered ecology: *delusion, greed, and a lost sense of interdependency*. All of this is seen in discussions on economics and demography.

Bretton Woods puts all this in display. In July 1944 world leaders gather in New Hampshire at Bretton Woods. Hitler’s defeat was only months away. These leaders were buoyed by hope for a world of peace and prosperity for everyone. Noble goals indeed, but marred by fatal assumptions including the delusion of infinity. Henry Morgenthau, the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, presided at the conference and his opening speech, pregnant with great expectations, set the tone. All the peoples of the earth were to enjoy “the fruits of material progress on

19 See David W. Orr, *Earth in Mind* (Washington, D.C.: Island, 1994); Clive Ponting, *A Green History of the World: The Environment and the Collapse of Great Civilizations* (New York: Penguin, 1991); Edward O. Wilson, *The Future of Life* (New York: Knopf, 2002).

an earth *infinitely* (emphasis added) blessed with natural resources.” Lest anyone miss his point on infinity, he hammered it: all participants were to embrace the “elementary economic axiom...that prosperity has *no fixed limits*. It is *not a finite substance* to be diminished by division.”²⁰(Emphasis added)

David Korten points to the “deeply flawed” assumptions of Bretton Woods. “The first is that economic growth and enhanced world trade would benefit everyone. The second is that economic growth would not be constrained by the limits of the planet.”²¹ The tidal pull of these assumptions was fatal, especially to the poor, the orphans, and the widows, those favorites of the biblical prophets. As Robert Reich, the former U.S. Secretary of Labor says, the result of Bretton Woods was that a thin segment of the super-rich at the very top of the chain of wealth have formed a stateless alliance that defines the global interest in a way that happens to be synonymous with the personal and corporate financial interests of its members.²² In 1992 The United Nations Development Program’s Human Development Report showed that 82.7 percent of income goes to the top 20%, leaving 18.3 % for the rest of humanity.

THE BIG LIES OF DEVELOPMENT

Our penchant for delusion shows up in bold relief in the words “developed” and “developing” which have attained universal jargon status. Some see Harry Truman as the instigator. In his inaugural address as president in 1949, Truman spoke rosily of the opportunity “for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas.”²³ These terms were loaded right from the start with normative presumptions. Truman made it clear: “Greater production is the key to prosperity and peace.” The exemplar for the perfection implied by “developed” was none other than the United States. Said Truman: “the United States is preeminent among nations in the development of industrial and scientific techniques.”²⁴ As Larry Rasmussen sums it up: “In short, developing countries were aspiring junior versions of developed ones, and developed ones were affluent industrialized democracies.”²⁵

The terms “developed” and “developing” are pants-on-fire lies. Developed is a normative term. It connotes and denotes what ought to be, and—here is the heart of the lie—what *can be* for all nations on earth. Sustainable consumption is suspect only if it contains assumptions of infinite resources, not if “sustainable”

20 U.S. Department of State, *Proceedings and Documents of the United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference, Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, July 1-22, 1944*, vol. 1, p790, cited by Bruce Rich, *Mortgaging the Earth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 54-55.

21 David Korten, “Sustainability and the Global Economy,” in Howard Coward and Daniel c. Maguire, eds. *Visions of a New Earth*, 30.

22 Robert B. Reich, *The Work of Nations* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

23 Cited by J. Ronald Engel, ‘Sustainable Development: A New Global Ethics,’ in *The Egg: An Eco-Justice Quarterly*, 12, no. 1 (winder 1991-92): 5.

24 Ibid.

25 Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 135.

means working within the reality of limit.

Reality enters a dissent to the naivetes of Bretton Woods and “development” mythology. Resources are not infinite nor can growth be infinite. As Edward O. Wilson says: “The key elements of natural capital, Earth’s arable land, ground water, forests, marine fisheries and petroleum are ultimately finite...for the rest of the world to reach United States levels of consumption with existing technology would require four more planet Earths.”²⁶ No more than three billion people could live the way the world’s affluent live now. We are more than double that now and the demographic momentum surges on in the poorer parts of the world. In 1930 there were two and a half billion people on earth. There are triple that number now with date certain for a cap on our numbers.

There are more fertiles on earth now than there were people in 1960. It is a rule of nature that we limit our numbers or nature will do it for us. We are the only species that can make that decision reflectively and freely. Family planning with contraceptives and abortion as a backup when needed is a requisite for human survival. Here is where the world religions fill either a help or hinder role. The major religions of the world were spawned at a time when the survival of the species was parlous. The problem was depopulation. The Emperor Augustus penalized bachelors and rewarded families for their fertility. Small wonder: he presided over a Roman society with an average life expectancy of less than 25 years. It was world in which, as historian Peter Brown says, “death fell savagely on the young.” As a species, we formed our fertility habits in a world that was, in John Chrysostom’s words, “grazed thin by death.” Only four of a hundred men and fewer women saw their fiftieth birthday.²⁷

The major religions of the world were formed when death was ever crouching near the door. A strong natalism was to be expected. Experience, however, bred some good sense. In all the world’s religions, alongside the libertarian natalist view, there is a recognition that fertility is not a blessing when we have outstripped our personal, physical, or societal resources. Although there is a great deal of ignorance on this subject even among scholars, there is broad support in all religions for fertility management, including contraception and abortion when needed as a backup...and this is even true in the overall very natalist tradition of Roman Catholicism. There is a solid pluralism on contraception, with abortion as a backup, in all religions.²⁸

Hyperfertility is a moral issue. Reproducing beyond the capacity of resources is both irrational and immoral. This is not a new insight. Thirty-five hundred years ago a Babylonian tablet told the story that the Gods made humans to do scut work that was unworthy of the divinities but the problem was the humans began to over-reproduce. Solution? The gods send plagues to diminish the population and made it a religious obligation for the remaining humans to limit

26 Edward O. Wilson, *The Future of Life* (New York: Knopf, 2002), 149-50.

27 See Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 6.

28 Cf. Daniel C. Maguire, ed. *Sacred Rights: The Case for Contraception and Abortion in world Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Daniel C. Maguire, *Sacred Choices: The Right to Contraception and Abortion in Ten World Religions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

their fertility. Joel Cohen says that this “is perhaps the earliest extant account of human overpopulation and the earliest interpretation of catastrophe as a response to overpopulation.”²⁹ Jack Miles argues that the Genesis story of the time of the flood “suggests that the unchecked multiplication of humans also played a part.” God is presented as in “an ongoing struggle” with humankind over the control of human fertility.³⁰

Aristotle taught that the number of people should not exceed the resources needed to provide them with moderate prosperity.³¹ Thomas Aquinas agreed with Aristotle that the number of children generated should not exceed the provisions of the community and he even went so far as to say that this should be ensured by law as needed, putting him far to the left of the United States Congress. Thomas nicely sidestepped the question of how this would be legally enforced. But he insisted that if more than a certain number of citizens were generated, the result would be poverty, which would breed thievery, sedition, and chaos.³²

The ethical issue is not just limited to numbers; the justice issue of redistribution is also involved. People in the poor world point to the fact that over-consumption is more devastating than over-reproducing. The fewer than three million people in Chicago consume more than the over one hundred million people in Bangladesh. Chicagoans do more to overheat the earth than Bangladeshis. Over-consumption illustrates all three of the vices Buddhism warned against: *greed, delusion, and no sense of interdependency*. Greed leads to the monopolizing of finite

29 Joel Cohen, *How Many People Can the Earth Support?* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 6.

30 Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1995), 47-48.

31 Aristotle, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), *Politics*, Book 2, chap. 6.

32 Thomas Aquinas, *Omnia Opera*, Tomus XLVII, *Sententia Libri Politicorum* (Rome, Ad Sanctae Sabinae, 1971), A 140-41. Thomas Aquinas, *Liber Secundus Politicorum*. In this commentary on the *Politics* of Aristotle, Thomas agrees with Aristotle on the need to limit population and to do so by legal enforcement. This was a repeated concern of Aristotle given the size of the city-state in Greece. Thomas returns to this in several of the *lectiones* in his Commentary on Aristotle's second book of *Politics*, *lectiones* 6, 8, 13, 15, and 17. In *lectio* 6, Thomas embraces Aristotle's reasoning on the dire effects of overpopulation, saying approvingly: “Ostendit quomodo oportet determinari multitudinem generatorum; et dicit quod hoc ideo necessarium est, quia si permittatur quod in infinitum homines generent absque aliquo determinato numero, sicut communiter fit in civitatibus, ex necessitate sequitur quod ex hoc proveniat cause paupertatis civibus....ex paupertate autem civium sequitur quod sint seditiosi et maligni; quia dum non habent necessaria vitae, student ea acquirere fraudibus et rapinis.” *Lectio* 6. [“Aristotle shows how it is necessary to limit the number of persons born; he says that this is quite necessary since if people are permitted to reproduce in infinitum without having some determined population size, as often happens in the cities, it necessarily follows that this will produce poverty among the citizens....from the poverty of citizens it follows that they become seditious and malign; because when they do not have the necessities of life, they will strive to acquire them through fraud and robbery.”] Thomas, however, is quick to demur when he disagrees with Aristotle on the means to achieve this necessary limitation of population. He breaks with Aristotle when Aristotle speaks of the idea of encouraging men to have sex with men to avoid generation of children. Thomas condemns this “*turpem masculorum coitum*.” *Lectio* 15. As Catholic author Johannes Messner comments in his *magnum opus* on natural law, *Social Ethics; Natural Law in the Western World* (St. Louis & London: B Herder Book Co., Revised Edition, 1964) 705: Thomas insists “one cannot aim at a proportionate equality in the distribution of property which is vital for a political community, and at the same time allow an infinite growth of the population.”

resources; it is a malignancy on the body social. It violates justice, and the greedy do not get away with it in an overpopulated world. A malignancy in one part of a body makes the body sick and the symptoms will soon be felt throughout the whole organism. Thomas Aquinas stated the demands of a just society quite simply: "Justice consists in sharing."³³ The Book of Proverbs said, "the poverty of the poor is their ruin." (10:15) We can update that wisdom: the poverty of the poor is also our ruin. The affluent are rapid earth wreckers; the poor are slower but there are so many more of them and their ruin comes home to us in the air, the water, and the strawberries. Poverty, like capital, has gone global in its effects. More than ever, the poor are *our* poor, organically linked into the sinews of our economics and politics.

The ethical failing that gets hidden in an ethically challenged world order is resistance to sharing. It is at the heart of our fatality as a species. As ethicist James Martin Schramm says, a just world requires a redistribution "of land and income, improvement in access to education and employment, the elimination of discrimination based on race or sex, and substantial improvement in access to affordable housing, food and health care."³⁴ The population problem cannot be solved by throwing condoms at it, though condom availability is essential. Starving people who look to their children for social security in their old age look to their children for what society will not provide and they won't accept condoms in exchange for security.

My father born in Donegal in the nineteenth century was one of thirteen children; only five survived into adulthood. That is still the state of much of the world and telling the impoverished to just wear condoms is like telling them to eat cake. A just redistribution of wealth is their requirement. It is not complicated. With close to two billion people in serious starving poverty, James Tobin, winner of the 1984 Nobel Prize for economics, proposed a simple plan for remedial sharing on this planet. Trillions of dollars whirl around the globe in foreign-exchange transactions, all of it untaxed. Tobin proposed a 0.5 percent tax that would help dampen speculative international financial gambling and would be too small to deter serious trade and investment. This money could be used to pay the crushing debts of poor nations, to properly fund the United Nations, to stamp out illiteracy (a prime stimulant to hyperfertility), and to fund the marvelous nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) that are a major and growing force for good around the world.³⁵

33 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Nichomachean Ethics of Aristotle*, 8, 9, #1658. *Justitia consistit in communicatione. Communicatio* means sharing.

34 James B. Martin-Schramm, "Population Growth and Justice," in Aziza al-Hibri, Daniel Maguire, and James B. Martin-Schramm, eds., *Religious and Ethical Perspectives on Population Issues* (Milwaukee, WI: The Religious Consultation on Population, Reproductive Health and Ethics, 1991), 17.

35 See David Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World* (West Hartford, Conn.: Kumarian, 1996), 321.

H + A + A = A

This formula sums up our troubling circumstance: **H + A + A = A**. *Hyperfertility* plus *Affluence* plus *Appetite* = *Apocalypse*. A gaudy affluence is the well advertised and driving norm on the planet; as people get affluence their appetites grow. The result is the apocalypse now in process. Some forty million people die every year from hunger and poverty-related causes—the equivalent of three hundred jumbo jet crashes daily with half of the passengers being children.³⁶ The lack of sharing, the lack of justice is murderous. The current maldistribution of wealth is not an accident; it is organized crime.

As Thomas Jefferson wrote to James Madison: “whenever there are unemployed poor, “it is clear that the laws of property have been so far extended as to violate natural right.”³⁷ The insight predated Jefferson. The ancient Thales said: “If there is neither excessive wealth nor immoderate poverty in a nation, then justice may be said to prevail.”³⁸ This need for justice, for proper sharing is not just some airy ideal, a noble but abstract desideratum. The alternative is chaos, a term that well describes today’s international order. As Aristotle put it in an all too cryptic way “it is by proportionate requital that the city holds together.”³⁹ More simply put, it is justice, i.e. appropriate and essential sharing that holds the community together. Justice is the soul; society the body. The unjust society is dysfunctional though it may have pockets of well heeled order, gated communities and gated nations with nervous borders.

There is a reason for that. The two indispensable needs of humankind are *respect* and *hope*. The opposite of respect is insult; the loss of hope is paralysis.⁴⁰ Poverty is not just a lack of money; more deeply, more devastatingly, it is a lack of respect and hope. The lack of justice breeds rebellion. Again it was Aristotle who observed that people who are themselves dishonored and who see others obtaining honors rise in rebellion. You may have to build a wall in Israel to keep the deprived Palestinians out or you may have to build electronic fences along the Texan borders to keep the poor out, but the result is not peace. Strip people of respect and hope and you as well as they will pay the price. Justice and only justice holds the city together. Isaiah deserves a posthumous Nobel Prize for saying all this in just one verse, Isaiah 32:17: “only when you plant the kind of justice that eliminates poverty (*Tsedaqah*) will you have peace” (*Shalom*).⁴¹

The United States and Israel are the star exhibits for the truth of Isaiah 32:17, i.e., *no justice, no peace, and justice and security only happen with the elimination of poverty*. United States is the number one military nuclear power and Israel is number six. Neither is secure. Both are building barriers to keep out the victims of their own brutal imperialism. Isaiah would say: “I told you already!” Our

36 Clive Ponting, *A Green History of the World*, 254.

37 To Rev. James Madison, October 28, 1785, quoted in Yeshoshua Arieli, *Individualism and Nationalism in American Ideology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press., 1964), 159.

38 Plutarch, *Banquet of the Seven Wise Men*, Chapter 11.

39 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1132b.

40 cf. Daniel C. Maguire *Ethics: A Complete Method for Moral Choice*, 57-59.

41 See Daniel C. Maguire, *A Moral Creed for All Christians*, Chapter Four, “Justice Bible-Style,” (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 41-80.

species, which is more clever than wise, routinely misses the simplest of truths. You cannot build prosperity on despoliation and suppression through military and economic imperialism. Imperialism is quite simply organized greed and the United States and Israel, among others, are unwittingly re-teaching the lesson that really should not have to be taught again.

WHOM THE GODS WOULD DESTROY THEY FIRST MAKE MYOPIC

There are delusions that all the disciplines, religion, ethics, the social sciences, and certainly that usually wrong pastiche called “conventional wisdom” get wrong. They tend to collectively miss the fact that reality is process and stasis is illusory. They are not unlike the poor fellow who loses a bet on a play watching a football game on TV, and loses again when he places the same bet on the replay. Among other things, he lacks a sense of process. He deludedly thinks he can freeze the discourse with no operative awareness that time is swirling on. He misses the fact that past is not present and he blocks out the surprises of the future. How much research in all disciplines huddles over a desk and fails to look out the windows at the movements of a universe in flux. Wisely, Carl Sagan preferred Democritus to Plato and Aristotle, at least on this count. Democritus was a citizen of the universe, not just of this planet. He figured out, way ahead of his time, that the Milky Way was composed of multiple stars. He was a non-occluded thinker.

Even though we know more than Democritus about the hundred thousand million stars in the Milky Way galaxy, our thinking is still earth-bound.⁴² Our species’ sense of exceptionalism needs chastening. Serious scientists feel that life and even intelligent life is a “cosmic commonplace.”⁴³ We may not be the unique appearance of intelligent life; in fact we may be possibly not even the brightest form of intelligent life. Our pollution record tenders grounds for humility. We are early on in the evolutionary process. We have only been here for one one-thousandth of the age of the earth. We are juvenile upstarts not that far removed from our quadruped ancestors and we don’t know what surprises evolution has in store for us a million or two years hence.

Martin Rees, the distinguished cosmologist and astrophysicist, chastens our sense of completeness and our feeling that with us evolution peaked gloriously and stopped.

Ever since Darwin, we’ve been familiar with the stupendous time spans of the evolutionary past. But most people still somehow think we humans are necessarily the culmination of the evolutionary tree. No astronomer could believe this. Our sun formed 4.5 billion years ago, but has 6 billion more years to go before the fuel runs out. And the expanding universe will continue—perhaps forever—becoming even colder, ever emptier. As Woody Allen said, ‘Eternity is very long, especially towards the end.’ Any creatures who witness the sun’s demise, here on Earth or far beyond, won’t be human. They will be

42 Carl Sagan, *The Varieties of Scientific Experience*, 225.

43 Ibid., 28-29.

entities as different from us as we are from a bug.⁷⁴⁴

That gives a whole new astrophysical twist to the words of John the apostle when he said "It has not yet appeared what we will be" (1 John 3:3). We would be humbler, with less clouded optical lenses, if we recognized that we are probably technological and cultural adolescents.⁴⁵ We do have a suspicion that there is life out there and "flying saucers" from other parts of the universe have had a million unproved "sightings" since 1947. But beyond popular fantasies, there is ongoing a sophisticated search for extraterrestrial intelligence at Harvard University working with the Planetary Society.⁴⁶ Given the technical requirements of communication at such a distance, the ruling assumption is that if there are intelligent beings out there in the universe they would be "vastly more advanced than us" to be able to reach us. They may be thousands or even millions of years more advanced than we are. And many scientists believe this most probably is the case.⁴⁷

Humility is the beginning of wisdom. If we could think of ourselves as primitives we would be much more careful in how we handle our delicate earthly matrix. We stagger under illusions of maturity and superiority. Duane Elgin asks: "How grown up do you think humanity is? When you look at human behavior around the world and then imagine our species as one individual, how old would that person be? A toddler? A teenager? A young adult? An elder?"⁴⁸ He marshals evidence that our behavior throughout the world is adolescent. (There's that word again.) Teenagers are rebellious, out to prove their independence. Humanity has been trying to prove its independence from the rest of nature for thousands of years. Teenagers are reckless, oblivious of the consequences of their behavior. Humanity has been consuming resources and killing off species as though there were no tomorrow. Teenagers are fixated on appearance, with fitting in to the current chic, and they seek to establish their identity through the accumulation of material resources. Teenagers are drawn toward instant gratification. They like to form cliques and often express "us versus them" and "in versus out" behavior. Humanity clusters into ethnic, racial, religious and national groupings that separate us from one another.⁴⁹ It's a scary scene: humanity myopically concentrated on frenzied military spending to do battle with other gangs. Well over a trillion dollars a year spent on kill-power not life-power. Adolescent humanity packing thermo-nuclear heat, binging on non-renewable resources, and allowing tribal interests to trump human unity and fruitful compassionate cooperation.

There are even sterner diagnoses. Thomas Berry (who called himself a geologist) sees our species as suffering from "autism." We have alienated ourselves from the rest of nature. He argues that this happened in the Western world in three

44 Martin Rees, "What the Future Looks Like," <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2009/may26/future-planet-earth/print>

45 Ibid., 115.

46 Ibid., 116-123.

47 Ibid., 118.

48 Duane Elgin, *Promise Ahead: A Vision of Hope and Action for Humanity's Future* (New York: William Morrow, 2000), 1.

49 Ibid., 2-14.

phases. First he indicts the influential Christian sell-out to an unbalanced anthropocentrism when Christians bedded down with Greek humanism. This led to a *fuga mundi* (flight from the world) spirituality that no longer lets the “grace and mystery of life wash our grimy souls,” to use ethicist Larry Rasmussen’s phrase.⁵⁰ The second phase of alienation Berry traces to the unimaginable horrors of the Black Death from 1347 to 1349 when half or more of the afflicted people died. That furthered detachment from this God-punished wicked world. The final spur to our autism came from our move from self-renewing agriculture to an “industrial non-renewing extractive economy.” With that the planet “lost its wonder and majesty, its grace and beauty, its life-giving qualities. The planet became an object of use.”⁵¹

The indictment of historical Christianity are highlighted in a remarkable book by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*. As the title signals the authors argue that Christianity fell out of love with the earth in favor of a spiritualized beyond. Paradise later won over Paradise here. Their quest is for the recovery of the beauty of an earth-loving Christianity lost for a thousand years beneath dry creeds and formulae and poisonous myths of sacralized violence.⁵² Belief in an afterlife is a belief not an empirically demonstrable reality. It can function as a distraction from the earth and as a stimulant for speciesism since we are equipped with afterlife insurance, and the rest of nature is not.⁵³ Earth as *prolegomenon* and Earth as *destiny* are seriously divergent world views and divergent ethics.

PROSPECTS FOR RECOVERY

Myopia can be cured by remedial lenses, and reality is begging to supply some. Stupidity unmasked is repulsive, and the unmasking is well on. Money talks and it is now daring to “talk trash” to the military glutton. The “defense budget” (more truthfully, the war budget) is a modern example of the *disciplina arcani*, the early Christian practice of keeping some special secrets close to the hierarchical breast and far from the outsiders and common folk. Military spending was never based on an honest tax. If people were suddenly told that ten percent of their wages would be garnished to pay for ongoing wars, people would take note and remove their vapid “Support the Troops” bumper stickers in a hurry. Instead the costs are hidden in a thicket of numerical lies. Experts at the independent Center for Defense Information cannot figure out how much is being spent, saying

50 Thomas Berry, “Christianity’s Role in the Earth Project,” in Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, eds., *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 127-34. Rasmussen’s comment is in Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community Earth Ethics*, 55.

51 Thomas Berry, *ibid.*, 97.

52 Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Boston: Beacon, 2008).

53 On the implications of afterlife belief, see Daniel C. Maguire and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Ethics for a Small Planet: New Horizons on Population, Consumption, and Ecology* (Albany, New: State University of New York Press, 1998), 44-45.

that the official released figures are “inaccurate or incomplete or both.”⁵⁴

The inaccuracy and incompleteness is not minuscule. Best estimates make it off by several hundred billion dollars. The real budget for the year 2008 was \$926.8 billion.⁵⁵ Our imaginations flag and buckle when we get that close to a trillion. *Broken down to numbers we can grasp, we spend over 77 billion dollars a month, about 18 billion dollars a week, two and a half billion a day, over a hundred million an hour, almost two million dollars a minute, and about thirty thousand dollars a second.*

More understandable numbers: The United States spends 41.5 % of world military spending. China accounts for only 5.8% and Russia only 4.0 %. Meanwhile unemployment is at depression levels in the United States, our infrastructure is collapsing, our technical advantages being outstripped by other nations. The word “stupid” comes to mind.

Afghanistan also comes to mind. Americans are over there shedding blood and calling it “nation building,” while the Chinese are in Afghanistan also, buying and developing mineral rights in cooperative ventures with the Afghans. Afghanistan is considered the Saudi Arabia as to mineral deposits. As Nicholas Kristof observes, for every soldier stationed in Afghanistan, we spend one million dollars a year. For that amount the United States could build 20 schools and really build a nation.⁵⁶ There is that word again, “stupid.”

Here is mathematics that anyone can understand. If we took a million dollars an hour from that 100 million we spend on kill-power we could double the salaries of all elementary and high school teachers, blow up every inferior school building and replace it with something worthy of our children. With another million we could make all higher education free for anyone who qualifies and works at it. For another million we could fund alternative energy systems, end the oil addiction. For another million an hour we could address the problems of our ecology. Another million an hour could work to end illiteracy world-wide. We could end diseases as we did with small pox. We could go on to invest more in culture and the arts. And all of those things are labor intensive, i.e. they make jobs. We could, in a word, turn the earth green with hope and not red with slaughter.

These figures are not illusory. According to the United Nations *Human Development Report*, meeting human and earth needs “is not an exorbitant undertaking.” For 40 billion dollars more a year we could provide universal access to basic services such as education, health, nutrition, reproductive health, family planning, safe water, and sanitation.⁵⁷ As Duane Elgin says, “This is less than one-tenth of one percent of world income.”⁵⁸ Edward O. Wilson says that “an investment

54 William T. Wheeler, “The Chaos in America’s Vast Security Budget,” in *The Defense Monitor*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 2, (March-April 2008), 1-2.

55 Ibid.

56 Nicholas D. Kristof, “More Schools, Not Troops,” *New York Times*, October 28, 2009, A 23. He adds that for the 40,000 more troops President Obama added in a “surge” “we could just about turn every afghan into an Ph.D.”

57 *Human Development Report* 1998, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 17.

58 Duane Elgin, *Promise Ahead*, 127. Elgin’s work on hope for cure on this planet are well informed and powerful. See Duane Elgin, *The Living Universe* (San Francisco: Berrett-Kohler Publishers,

of about 28 billion dollars a year is needed to maintain at least a representative sample of Earth's ecosystems, land and sea, pole to pole." The parts of the world that contain about 70 percent of earth's plant and animal species can be saved by a single investment of roughly 30 billion dollars."⁵⁹ Similarly good things can be done at bargain prices compared to military squandering.

In sum, we have the technical means and the resources to solve the problems we have created on earth. As Pope John Paul II said, "the ecological crisis is a moral issue." Technically we can handle it. It is our morality that is on trial. Technology has improved communication. The Internet is the biggest advance since the invention of writing, and at least one fifth of the human race is or soon will be on line. For the first time in history, there are problems like global warming and diminished resources that affect the entire human race. Such pain could be bonding. There is hope in all of that.

As Margaret Swedish says, hope is not an option: it is a necessity. She clearly shows the catastrophic mess we are in. But then she demands hope because of "the children and young people" in her life, because of "the mountains and forests, the oceans, lakes, and rivers, because of the yellow-bellied marmot, the polar bears of the Arctic...the meadow birds, the frogs, and the butterflies." Her conclusion: "I cannot, cannot accept the alternative" to hope.⁶⁰

Inc, 2009 and Voluntary Simplicity, 2nd Revised Edition (New York: Harper Collins, 1993.)

59 Edward O. Wilson, *The Future of Life*, 182-83.

60 Margaret Swedish, *Living Beyond the End of the World: A Spirituality of Hope*. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2008), 204.