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TOWARD A RADICAL VIEW OF THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

By Ritchie P. Lowry❖

Whenever a new crisis or challenge emerges in American society, both leaders and citizens are quick to create a popular wisdom which simply, easily, and safely explains its origins and nature. Simple explanations are more readily understood, and they call only for easy responses. Easy responses entail minimal commitment in terms of time, money, and changes necessary to respond to the challenge. Safe answers and solutions ensure that prevailing special interests and social structures, which in reality may have contributed to the crisis, will not be threatened or altered. Such a process of rationalization is now developing with regard to the ecological crisis, and it may make it increasingly impossible for us to respond adequately to the root dimensions of the problem.

Popular wisdom concerning ecological problems tends to reflect three general perspectives. The first embodies an accidental or natural disaster theory of ecologically related catastrophies. The recent Los Angeles earthquake has been dismissed by many, particularly the residents of that area, as the consequences of bad luck and the as yet uncontrollable forces of nature. A raging forest fire is viewed as a consequence of the chance coalescence of natural factors—a lightning bolt, dry and hot weather, and highly flammable substances. A flood may be seen as resulting from forces over which only God has control.

Such explanations are foolishly, though comfortably, misleading. As some ecologists have recently indicated, there may be no such thing as a purely natural disaster. For example, every flood is, by definition, man-related. In natural surroundings, over a period of years, streams and rivers create a flood plain around the main water bed which, during the peak seasons of water flow,

harmlessly contains the excess runoff. Man tends to build many of his new suburban communities on these natural flood plains, without providing alternative avenues for additional water runoff. When water later destroys the housing, it is merely the result of a stream or river following its natural course, which man has unknowingly occupied. In the same manner, Los Angeles residents must expect far greater disasters than the recent quake if they continue to build totally inadequate structures directly over major faults.

The second popular perspective argues that the ecological crisis exists because all of us—the powerful and the powerless—help pollute and misuse the environment in small ways. Because there are so many of us, the small ways add up to a major problem. This type of rationalization is what Professor William Ryan has called an ironic way of blaming the victim.¹ That is, the victims of the problem are seen as the source of the problem. The answer, therefore, is obvious: the victims must stop littering, develop more of a social conscience about how they use their own private space, work toward the creation of nonpolluting fuels, and so on. In other words, business can continue as usual so long as we all act more responsibly. There are several major dangers in this view. First, some of us pollute a great deal more than others, and this is a function of who has power and who doesn't. Second, the rubbish and refuse of each of us as individuals is a function of the larger social system in which we live. Our personal life styles are determined to a great extent by the mass-production systems of an industrialized society. My becoming neater or your altering your personal habits will not seriously change the social system or the systems of production. Third, the massive character of the world-wide pollution problem will not be resolved by campaigns to clean up local backyards or village streams. We must clean up the Great Lakes and the world's major oceans. We must think of ways to persuade people not to abandon tens of thousands of automobiles every year in major urban centers. We must insist that nations with populations in the hundreds of millions immediately work toward zero population growth. Unfortunately, we Americans are pigs (to borrow a much misused appellation) compared to the rest of the world. We claim some 50% of the world's resources with less than 10% of the world's population. At the same time, we may contribute up to 60% of the world's pollution. Are we ready to reallocate our wealth? Major realloca-

tion will be necessary to respond to the fundamental problem, and that means that you and I may have to do without automobiles, electric toothbrushes, lawn mowers, lawn fertilizers, and the like.

Finally, popular wisdom, in its curiously illogical way, also provides an alternative rationalization—ecological crises result from evil men in high places. The attractiveness of the conspiracy theory has been evident throughout American history and is very apparent in present attitudes regarding ecology. United States Steel, American Telephone and Telegraph, Standard Oil, and other corporate giants are seen as co-conspirators with political leaders to maximize profits regardless of environmental costs. Again, the answer seems simple and obvious: legislation leading to control must be enacted to curtail the power of the elite. The problem is that legislation has existed in many areas for a number of years, but it tends to be grossly inadequate or all but ignored. So long as a major public commitment to alter life styles and traditional patterns of economic behavior radically is not made, legislation will remain relatively ineffective. This perspective, however, can provide a satisfactory devil toward which the public and political leaders can direct their personal feelings of inadequacy and impotence.

It seems, then, that theories based upon the notion of acts of God, luck, accidents, ill manners, or a malevolent elite, are misleading half-truths. They may contain an element of reality in specific and discrete cases, but they cannot lead to fundamental responses to the nature of the problem. If this is so, why do these theories and perspectives persist, and is there an alternative?

In a recent article, I argued that Americans are enthusiastic supporters of new mass movements, fads, crazes, and religions, and that this propensity was especially evident in the recent enthusiasms generated for a national ecological crusade.² However, the new "religecology" runs the very great risk of further masking the basic nature of the ecological crisis. Studies of mass movements disclose two types: (1) those that express an individual's ability to stand out from the crowd or from oppressive social forces and conditions and (2) those which involve large groups of people with diverse interests in common collective action. The first type is typical of periods in a society when large numbers of citizens suffer common deprivation. What is

sought is a style of behavior that dramatizes one's transcendence, as an individual, over these deprivations. The second type of mass movement is characteristic of periods in society like the present. Great schisms and fractures mar the social structure: black versus white, poor versus rich, hawk versus dove, establishmentarians versus radical revolutionaries. In other words, all citizens are influenced by these conflicts in some way, though not all elements of the population suffer in the same way.

American society has frequently experienced the first type of mass movement during depressions and wars, when all citizens suffer equally the same general fate, and flagpole sitting, dance marathons, bizarre changes in fashion, or a Lindberg flight followed by other spectacular acts of individual achievement catch the collective imagination and mind. The second type of mass movement reflects a different need for a national involvement which bridges schisms and fractures, and which engages all citizens in common effort for a good cause. It is evident that the appeal of a national ecological crusade has been built upon these characteristics. Indeed, the Nixon administration seems to be consciously using the issue for these political purposes. Ecological concern is not traditionally or parochially religious or partisan—it demands a new religious and political commitment which transcends old antagonisms. Furthermore, every citizen, no matter how powerless, can do something about pollution. There is an immediate gratification and release of feelings of impotence, powerlessness, alienation, and frustration. Praying is replaced by Boy Scout troops cleaning up local creeks, concerned community groups refurbishing town dumps, housewives using nondetergent soaps, citizens petitioning corporations to develop cleaner methods of production, leaders proposing new legislation—and the new god, nature, seems to respond magically right before our eyes. The indoor church is replaced by the sacred outdoors, and the Sunday ritual becomes an everyday action involving all community residents in a common cause. Finally, the new ecological crusade can be built upon the popular wisdom which sees the crisis as a function of luck, acts of God or nature, irresponsible behavior by elites, and simple bad manners of the victim. The collective religious commitment to cleaning up the environment creates a kind of therapeutic community in which all can purge themselves of personal guilt by simple and imme-

diate acts of penitence. Yet, the major activities of life can continue relatively unchanged.

There are five fundamental and serious flaws in this developing ecological crusade. First, a pseudocommunity commitment and involvement can easily mask the extensive nature of the environmental problem. Second, the real problem facing the world is the necessity to reallocate resources, not just clean or tidy them up. Together with reallocation goes the necessity to alter present life styles and social structures radically. Third, community involvement to clean up the environment will do nothing about basic problems like racial tensions, starvation in underdeveloped nations, hunger amidst affluence, or an uncontrollable military establishment, and all of these play essential roles in environmental problems. These types of basic problems could eventually explode and totally wreck whatever small successes had been accomplished by a national ecological crusade. However, the sad fact is that it may be in the best interests of politicians and other leaders to stress social cooperation on environmental control rather than address the more basic issues of survival, which call for confrontation.

Fourth, the attempts to demythologize and depoliticize the current social context by emphasizing an ecumenical and non-partisan commitment to ecology are a cruel and dangerous hoax. Answers to the real problems confronting us, including those of the environment, will require difficult ethical and political choices and decisions. New values, commitments, and beliefs must be sought. Answers to basic problems will be found only through the political process and will require the clash and compromise of opposing partisan perspectives. Fifth, then, the new religecology is essentially conservative in nature at a time when radical solutions to problems are required. Unfortunately, the term "radical" has lost its basic meaning and utility as a result of its stereotypical use by recent political leaders for private purposes. A radical perspective has no necessary relationship to blowing up buildings, causing chaos in the streets, overthrowing present political leaders, or other forms of extremist behavior. Classically, a radical view of a problem probes for the root causes; it argues that a crucial distinction must be made between symptoms of a problem and those factors which are the origin of and which sustain the problem. For example, unsightly town dumps, smog,

abandoned automobiles, poisoned waters, deteriorated dwellings, crowded urban ghettos, and the like are merely symptoms of an environmental crisis. As any good physician knows, to treat the symptoms only make the patient feel better while he continues to die.

In contrast, a radical perspective assumes that the symptoms of environmental decay reflect root problems, and that these problems are created by the way you and I have chosen to live, play, work and politic. Pollution is not a pathology that can be cut away from contemporary life; on the contrary, it is an inherent consequence and result of contemporary life. Answers can only be sought by raising serious questions about the way we live, play, work and politic, and by seeking alternatives, and the answers must represent a considerable departure from the usual or traditional. The new religecology has, so far, proposed solutions that would merely address the symptoms while permitting business as usual. It is for this reason that it is not surprising to find a Richard Nixon eagerly embracing antipollution causes and becoming the high priest of the new religion. Nor is it surprising that American corporations have joined the crusade.

In what specific ways would a radical perspective contribute to a newer, more productive view of the ecological crisis? At the base of the ecological problem lie three prevailing ethics, which predominate in western society: the Protestant Ethic, the Spirit of Capitalism, and the Idea of Progress. These ethics determine the nature of our present religious, economic, and political systems. They have also made it possible to build a social and cultural system within which the ultimate destruction of the ecosystem is inevitable. All human relationships are seen as essentially competitive. Not only is man pitted against man, but man is pitted against nature or the forces of God. Men and nature are converted into commodities, resources to be manufactured and merchandised within a context of a kind of neo-Darwinian process where the most fit will supposedly survive. The concept of private property plays an important role: this is my land, my wife, my children, my job, my community, my country. I have a right to determine the usage and destiny of my property. Indeed, my very salvation and state of grace can be determined by how successfully I manipulate my property.³ In other words, progress is a measure of a man's, a community's, or a country's

worth, and progress is evident by growth, size, numbers, and quantity.

These sorts of beliefs and values should be familiar to all Americans, since they are a fundamental part of our history (as it is taught) and of our prevailing religious (Christian), economic (Capitalist), and political (Democratic) institutions. It should also be obvious that these very beliefs are helping us destroy one another and the environment. A bourgeois commitment to rugged individualism and self-determination, a belief that man was created by God to have ultimate dominion over nature, and a crusading commitment to carry our democratic system to other, less fortunate parts of the world may have worked well to break the bonds of feudal society and usher in the urban and industrial revolutions. However, in the world of the 1970's these same ethics have become curiously outmoded and ultimately self-destructive. We must now reexamine seriously the concept of private property, the idea of man's God-given transcendence over nature, the notion of progress. Alternative values and beliefs must be sought, and this can only be achieved by a willingness on the part of leaders and citizens to adopt radical perspectives.

What this entails specifically with regard to the ecological crisis can be illustrated by reference to particular problems. The typical religecology answer to the problem of automobile pollution is to clean up the exhaust of the car by encouraging private enterprise in research and experimentation. However, even if this purely cosmetic approach were successful, other more crucial, long-term problems would remain unanswered. Are more and bigger highways and automobiles desirable, as the American Automobile Association would have us believe? Are there no rational and functional limits to this increase? Should we ban the use of private transportation in already congested urban centers? Who will pay the cost of cleaner air? This last question is critical, for there is substantial profit to be made in pollution-control systems. Industries could be encouraged to continue to pollute, to develop systems to control this pollution, and to exact the cost plus a profit from the public. Indeed, there is evidence that industry is already aware of such opportunities.⁴ What about abolishing incentives for oil companies, including that fascinating form of corporate social welfare known as the oil depletion allowance, and thus encouraging the immediate development of

nonpolluting sources of energy at reasonable costs (for example, solar cells)? These kinds of questions force us to examine concepts like progress and private property rights. They force us to consider alternatives which would lead to a society with different kinds of products, industries, values, and goals.

Pollution of the seas and oceans cannot be adequately limited by proposing legislation which requires private enterprise to police itself in utilizing safety measures. A more fundamental response would be a declaration that the world's bodies of water are public, world property, not available for private, personal development or utilization. Since within the world's ecosystem water does not follow the artificial boundaries of private property established by men (where is the Mississippi River in the stratosphere?), all bodies of water must be included in this new definition, no matter where their specific geographic location in land form. This would make possible the establishment of international cooperative organizations which could control usage by representing the public interests of the world. Furthermore, it would require nations like ours to prohibit oil drilling on the outer continental shelf, a major contribution to pollution as illustrated by the recent Santa Barbara oil spill.

In the same manner, other aspects of the ecological crisis must be approached in radical ways. Slum conditions will not be resolved by cleaning up the inner city and improving garbage collection and other city services. What may be needed is a massive program of low-cost housing, utilizing radical architectural and technological methods, and a restructuring and redistribution of urban centers. What is also needed is a concept of the city as a place to live, not merely as a market for consumption or production. The living conditions of the unemployed, transient, poor, deviant, aged, and lower class cannot be significantly improved by making them more superficially bearable, especially at a time when relative deprivation for these groups in the population is worsening, though absolute deprivation over the years may have lessened. Garbage disposal problems will not be resolved by developing new ways of processing refuse, for we will simply have more garbage in newer forms. Perhaps we should consider giving up no-deposit-no-return bottles, plastic containers, most magazines and newspapers, and third-class mail and, therefore, radically altering our life styles and some of our industries. People

pollution will not be resolved by making birth control information available on a voluntary basis. The world's major religions must reevaluate their traditional beliefs and take into account the moral implications of bringing a child into a context offering only death, disease, poverty, starvation, and suffering, for that is what most of the rest of the world increasingly has come to offer. Furthermore, are we willing to consider giving tax incentives for small, rather than large families? Should we not reverse the present federal income tax dependency allowance if we are really serious about controlling population growth in responsible ways?

In summary, the new religecology promises more soporific than salvation precisely at that time when salvation may be rapidly escaping attainment. This situation will continue so long as leaders and citizens insist upon minimizing confrontation, avoiding radical change, and eschewing inconvenience to prevailing life styles. Only a willingness to develop radical perspectives will lead us to raise the correct questions and seek appropriate answers. In this connection, a final note of caution is necessary. American popular wisdom associates the term "radical" with communism or socialism, and usually with a specific national form of these political and economic systems (*e.g.*, the Soviet Union, Red China). This, too, is a dangerously misleading half-truth. It is one of the ironies of the modern world that the Russian experiment in communism seems to have failed as totally as the western world's experiment in capitalism. Neither great utopia of the 19th century has brought about the peaceful and humane world it originally promised, and both seem to have created their own special forms of inhumanity. The way in which I have utilized the concept of a radical perspective would classify the Soviet Union as one of the most conservative nations in the contemporary world. Their unwillingness to raise root value questions is matched only by American unwillingness, and both nations share many beliefs in common with only minor variations (progress, a religious commitment to reform the world in their own image, the acceptance of the values of industrialization and urbanization, reliance upon military force to resolve disputes, etc.).

The radical perspective I have proposed is more a way of raising the fundamental questions and thinking about problems than a set of specific answers. It is a way of critically examining

old myths and beliefs which may no longer be viable. In a closed society, radical perspectives would lead elites to propose specific answers from isolated positions of authority. In an open society, radical perspectives would engage leaders and citizens in debate and confrontation leading to the formulation of specific answers through social, political, and legal processes. However, in either kind of society time is rapidly running out.



FOOTNOTES

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¹ William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim*. Pantheon, 1970.

² Ritchie P. Lowry, "The New Religecology: Salvation or Soporific?" *Social Policy*, 1 (July/August, 1970), 46-48.

³ For an excellent statement analyzing the nature of prevailing ethics, see "Toward an Ecological Solution," by Murray Bookchin; *Ecocatastrophe* by the editors of *Ramparts*, Canfield Press, 1970.

⁴ James Ridgeway, *The Politics of Ecology*. Dutton, 1970.