CHRISTIANITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

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Abstact: This paper (originally a public lecture given at Union Theological Seminary, New York) traces the growth of the environmental justice movement in the past forty years in the United States. It then considers environmental justice voices from Latin America (Gustavo Gutierrez), India (Vandana Shiva), and Africa (Wangari Mathai), as well as environmental justice struggles and martyrs. Finally, it outlines resources from within Christianity and Lutheranism (liberation theology and the theology of the cross), as well as economic and development experts to point the way to a just world.

Key Words: Christianity, sustainability, environmental justice, liberation theology, eco-feminism

OVERVIEW OF CONCEPT

Many people know that the root of the word *economics* is the same root for *ecumenical* (*oikos*, meaning house) and for *ecology*, too. We might say that environmental justice brings us to the largest question imaginable: how is all 6.6 billion of the world's human population to live together in one house, the earth? How are we to arrange our affairs (economics) and our life attitude (spirituality, religion, ecumenism) wisely and well and care for our homeland (house, the Earth)? What does this mean for our political arrangements, governing how we live together in community, whether in the city or in rural areas, in our homeland?

Environmental justice promotes a special and crucial site from which to explore these questions, ones often overlooked by those who measure economic "progress" according to a single "bottom line." Further, injustice often has an overlooked environmental dimension.

Environmental abuse, more often than not, directly and negatively affects human communities, and also disproportionably affects people of color or lower classes in all countries, especially poorer countries. Environmental injustice lodges the toxic effluent of industry in communities of people marginalized by race, class, or gender and offers the benefits to others. To create and use natural resources and luxury commodities (cotton, sugar, gold, coffee, ivory, diamonds, oil)—

resource extractors have inflicted untold suffering and exploitation of humans, animals, and the larger natural world. Healthy ecosystems over the long term foster human health and strengthen community.

We will consider environmental justice [sometimes called eco-justice] in North America, then in India, Africa, and Latin America. We will find that widely shared perspectives teach foundational principles, while unique voices give culturally and ecologically nuanced insights.

VOICES FROM NORTH AMERICA

The environmental justice movement in the U.S. spans thirty years or more. Its foundation is the age-old fight for empowerment against human rights abuses, which, it is worth mentioning, for Native Americans in the Americas is perhaps five hundred years old. Rachel Carson, author of *Silent Spring*, *The Sea Around Us*, and *The Edge of the Sea*, can in some ways, be considered a harbinger of the environmental justice movement. Carson protested the profligate use of synthetic pesticides after WWII, chronicling their devastation of the natural world, as well as their threat to humans. In response, she was attacked by the threatened chemical industry and some in government, who sometimes dismissed her as a "hysterical woman." Carson's scientific knowledge included awareness of the vulnerability of humans to toxics, a key for consciousness raising and empowerment of the environmental justice grassroots movement in the U.S from that time forward.

The strands of the tapestry of the U.S. environmental justice movement include the grape boycott and unionizing successes of the United Farmworkers' Movement of the late '60s and early '70s, as well as Lois Gibbs's successful battle against toxic terror in Love Canal. We recall the story when, in 1978, Gibbs discovered that her son's school and her whole neighborhood was built on a toxic waste site, she formed the Love Canal Homeowners' Assoc., leading to the resettlement of 833 families and the eventual clean-up of the site. Her subsequent organization,

the Center for Health, Environment, and Justice, has helped 10,000 groups in the U.S. to mobilize to protect themselves against chemical risks.

In the 1980s the eco-justice movement accelerated. In 1982, protests erupted in Warren County, N.C., against a PCB dump, led by local church officials and by the Rev. Dr. Benjamin Chavis, a longtime civil rights activist and, at that time, the head of the UCC's Commission for Racial Justice. Dr. Chavis is now considered by many to be the father of the environmental justice movement.

The resulting Commission's landmark 1987 study, conducted by Charles Lee and Vernice Miller and published as *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*, galvanized the movement. It "found that three out of five African Americans and Latinos nationwide live in communities that have illegal or abandoned toxic dumps" and that race "is the most potent variable in predicting where commercial hazardous waste facilities were located in the U.S..." (The follow-up report twenty years later corroborated those findings: host neighborhoods of toxic waste sites are 56 percent people of color, whereas non-host sites are areas of 30 percent people of color.) Thus, race was consistently more the predictor for toxic waste sites, than class.

In 1986 ecojustice activism successfully moved McDonalds away from the pollutants generated to create Styrofoam and Microsoft away from PVC plastic in 2006. Some struggles have focused on freeways, routed through black or Latino neighborhoods, such as the Cross Bronx expressway.

Along the way environmental justice movements have criticized mainstream environmental organizations, which they perceive as caring only for wilderness (where people are not), as having in their power positions few people of color, and as differing with environmental justice organizations on the very definition of environment. Eco-justice groups

define environment as "the place you work, the place you live, the place you play." Yet, mainstream environmentalists have argued that putting humans at the center of environmental discourse is a grave error, "...because humans are the perpetrators of environmental problems in the first place. [But] environmental justice activists maintain that some humans, especially the poor, are also the victims of environmental destruction and pollution and that, furthermore, some human cultures live in ways that are relatively sound ecologically. They therefore contend that the mainstream environmentalists' invention of a universal division between humans and nature is deceptive, theoretically incoherent, and strategically ineffective in its political aim to promote widespread environmental awareness."

In 1991the National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, held in Washington, D.C., attracted over three hundred delegates from fifty states. To me, their statement of 17 principles took steps to heal these rifts between eco-justice movements and "mainstream" environmentalists and importantly advanced the movement. (It was followed by the Second National Summit in 2002, attracting 14,000 individuals, of whom 75 percent came from community-based organizations.) ⁴

I will cite here only the preamble:

WE, THE PEOPLE OF COLOR, gathered together at this multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities, do hereby re-establish our spiritual interdependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth; to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves; to insure environmental justice; to promote economic alternatives which would contribute to the development of environmentally safe livelihoods; and, to secure our political, economic and cultural liberation.

The Native American critique of western culture's value of individualism to the expense of community undergirds a spiritual dimension to eco-justice in the U.S. and throughout the

world. Heart-breakingly tragic is the story of indigenous peoples who have experienced themselves "part of the created whole" yet whose lands have been used for all U.S. nuclear testing⁵ as well as oil and gas exploration and extraction. Native American self-determination (which for them means "self-sufficient, cultural, spiritual, political and economic sustainability"⁶), when achieved, could undeniably strengthen U.S. culture toward democracy and environmental justice.

VOICES FROM INDIA

An important Indian environmental justice movement is the Chipko movement, begun in the 1970s with a spontaneous action of nonviolent resistance by village activists, including thousands of women, of hugging trees to stop the trees from contractors' axes. These protests, protests, encapsulated in the slogan: "What do the forests bear? Soil, water, and pure air." successfully pressured the Indian government for a more ecologically sensitive natural resource policy.

A powerful voice from India is that of Vandana Shiva, a physicist, philosopher, and author of three hundred papers in scientific and technical journals and several well-read books. Her father a forester and her mother a lover of nature, Shiva received a PhD in Philosophy from University of Western Ontario with a thesis titled: "Hidden Variables and Non-locality in Quantum Theory." Renowned for organizing movements for sustainability, women's rights, biodiversity, property rights, and agriculture, and a leader of the International Forum on Globalization, Vandana Shiva she has won major awards for her activism (including in 1993 the Right Livelihood Award, also known as the alternative Nobel Prize). Her emphases and passion are captured in one of her books, *Soil Not Oil*: in it she asserts [quote]: "the shopping mall and the supermarket are temples of consumerism through which global corporations seduce us into

participating in the destruction of our productive capacities, our ecological rights, and our responsibilities as earth citizens. Soil teaches us how to be earth citizens....As globalization violently pushes peasants off the land, the soil symbolizes another culture, a culture of non-violence,...permanence,...dignity in work, a living culture for the protection and renewal of life....Earth Democracy grows in the fertile soil shaped by the earth, the human imagination, and human action." [unquote] For Shiva, development is not industrialization or profit-driven but "refers to self-directed, self-regulated, and self-organized evolution from within." ⁹ The solution "to climate change...and poverty are the same," she writes, "protecting, enhancing, and rewarding livelihoods, work, production, and consumption patterns centered on people, not on fossil fuels."

For Shiva and many eco-justice leaders, globalization is often nothing less than eco-imperialism, which is profit- and fossil-fuel driven, energy intensive, polluting, unjust, and wasteful, destroying the freedom and sovereignty of the other—whether other communities, countries, or species. They demand that we rethink poverty and wealth, because trading the nontradable—water or biodiversity—for profit creates poverty and rapacious environmental abuse. She and others argue that we need a paradigm shift toward a holistic world view, moving from a mechanistic, industrial paradigm to an ecological one, and a different definition of being human: from consumer to conserver. And, women are key; they've participated asymmetrically in much economic and social "development." ¹¹ The recent article "Why Women's Rights are the Cause of Our Time" in *The New York Times Magazine*, by Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl W. Dunn, which is based on their book *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for*

Women Worldwide, reports that a focus on women's health, education and micro-enterprises have proven records for success and are keys to solving poverty and even terrorism.¹²

VOICES FROM AFRICA

Wangari Mathai continues these arguments as a renowned leader in environmental justice in Africa and internationally. Native of Kenya, the first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a doctoral degree, she served as Chair of the Department of Veterinary Anatomy at University of Nairobi and then Chair of the National Council of Women of Kenya. At the National Council she introduced women's groups to tree planting to improve the health of the environment and women's lives. Her leadership blossomed into the Green Belt Movement; women planted twenty million trees on farms, schools, and church compounds. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004.

The successes of the Green Belt movement and the life-giving image of millions of green trees planted and protected by women provides a contrast to environmental injustices associated with extractive economies, especially the volatile commodity oil, sometimes called black gold. Conflict and injustice permeate the Niger Delta as an example. Nigeria is the 5th largest supplier of oil to the U.S.

"It is estimated that the country has realized about \$600 billion since 1956 from oil and gas..... The 2005 UNDP Human Development Report ranked Nigeria 158 out of 177 poorest countries of the world. ...[and] 70 per cent of Nigerians are classified as living in absolute poverty of less than \$1 per day." ¹³

Ken Saro-Wiwa, a Nigerian author, and winner of the Goldman Environmental Prize, was a member of the Ogoni people, whose homeland in the Niger Delta has been a site for oil extraction since the 1950s. Saro-Wiwa organized the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni

People. This movement developed a nonviolent campaign against environmental and social exploitation by the multinational oil companies, especially Shell, seeking a share of the wealth for the people of the Delta. Saro-Wiwa also openly criticized the Nigerian government. In 1995 the military government arrested, hastily tried and hanged him. This execution provoked international outrage and resulted in Nigeria's suspension from the Commonwealth of Nations.

VOICES FROM CENTRAL AND SOUTH AMERICA

Latin America, with highly unjust land distribution, extractive economies, and resource depletion, also has strong environmental justice movements. And Latin American liberation theology has contributed greatly worldwide to these issues in a Christian context. In *A Theology of Liberation*, published in 1973, Gustavo Gutierrez set the stage [quote]: "Salvation—the communion of human beings with God and among themselves...embraces all human reality, transforms it, and leads it to fullness in Christ," the Liberator...."To reflect upon the presence and action of the Christian in the world means,...to go beyond the visible boundaries of the Church. This is of prime importance. It implies openness to the world, gathering the questions it poses, being attentive to its historical transformations." ¹⁴ [unquote]

Gutierrez's theology is particularly effective for environmental justice issues because he views salvation as the Kingdom of God, which embraces all life, the fullness of *oikos* (house, home, economics, ecology, ecumenism). His is a grounded and embodied vision, heartbreaking, passionate, and hope-filled all at once. His poetic writing and appeal is as beautiful as a love letter, grounded, as he movingly reminds us, in John XXIII's reflection that the church is called to be the church of the poor.

This brief overview of environmental justice struggles around the world reveals many glimmers of light. But, let us step back for a moment: how will all 6.6 billion people live on this planet, sustainably, protecting it for the next generation? One billion people at the bottom, lack

basic life necessities. The first world (6 percent of the world' population, living in the U.S. and Europe) consumes 25 percent of the Earth's resources and is largely responsible for climate change. It would take four Earth's to live as the First World lives, yet the biggest U.S. export product is advertising. Many of Earth's ecosystems now verge on collapse.¹⁵

ECONOMICS

The present global economic system, in which the U.S. is the largest player, may be criticized for its lack of humanistic democratic values, and for its scandalous inattention to the erosion of nature's capital. Lutheran theologian Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, in *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God*¹⁶ outlines four powerful and inextricably linked global market myths: (1) growth benefits all; (2) freedom is market freedom; (3) "…human beings are essentially autonomous rational subjects rather than beings-in-community, competitive rather than cooperative, and consumerist rather than spiritual"¹⁷; and (4) corporate- and finance-driven globalization is inevitable.

Moe-Lobeda lifts up Martin Luther's theology, with his belief that "earth's creatures are filled to the utmost with God," as grounds for creation of an impulse of what she calls "subversive moral agency" desperately needed today. Her theology is grounded in Luther's incarnational theology, as we recall Luther's argument that God is incarnated everywhere, even in a leaf. 18

Christian economist David Korten (who worked for the World Bank), has recently authored *Agenda for a New Economy: From Phantom Wealth to New Wealth: Why Wall Street Can't be Fixed and How to Replace It*). [He describes the capitalist system as fostering greed and corporate power (parenthetically, the size of corporations is larger than some governments; in the early twentieth century corporations were ruled to have legal personalities akin to individuals).

The capitalist system has the corrosive power to universally disenfranchise persons. ¹⁹] As Korten argued in January of 2009 at Trinity Institute: The wanton human destruction of the earth that sustains us is unconscionable: the unjust distribution of the earth's resources, maintained by violence, constitutes crimes against God and ourselves by our own collective hand. Therefore, as individual humans we appear intelligent; collectively we appear to be pathologically suicidal. We either heal collectively or die together.

Korten thus echoes Moe-Lobeda: the problem is a pervasive collective story that leads us to believe that the economy is functioning well when it is killing us. The pervasive story is that economic growth, and rise in GDP, increases human happiness; that the faster we consume the wealthier we become; that greed is good; that financial advantage is the highest value.

In fact, the richer we are, the more we pathologically convert real resources to toxic waste. Korten asks what purpose we expect the economy to serve and reminds us that "No one can serve two masters [Lk. 16:13]." We need to create a new economy devoted to the service of life, a choice we must make as a society.

As many now realize, we are not even truly guided by our economic measurements: GNP and corporate budgets don't measure negative "externalities," such as pollution and injustice. The Exxon Valdez oil spill made us look richer than before the tragedy occurred. Christian theologian John Cobb and Herman Daly wrote *For the Common Good*, oin which they analyzed the American economy and annual budget in light of negative environmental and social externalities. They determined that we in the United States are half as wealthy as we think we are.

For Korten, as for Gutierrez, Mathai, and Shiva, real wealth is nature, labor, land, knowledge, and human resources, such as love, healthy children, and a job that provides a sense of meaning, a healthy environment, and peace.

SOLUTIONS FROM THE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

The churches, lately come to the care for creation forefront, have become eco-justice advocates. In 1989 the World Council of Churches wrote the paper Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation, to fostered innumerable study and witness activities to resist social and ecological destruction and to create viable alternatives to corporate globalization, guided by a vision of Earth as Home.

In 1996, Equal Exchange joined with Lutheran World Relief in a pathbreaking collaboration to create partnerships with communities of faith throughout the U.S. Lutheran World Relief, together with Audubon Society provide information on fair trade, shade grown coffee (grown by coffee cooperatives that ensure a fair wage to coffee growers), which is being sold and served more and more by knowledgeable faith groups! And such actions teach the facts that coffee's popularity has not translated to higher incomes for coffee growers. Further, canopy trees are often cut to grow coffee, destroying bird habitat in some of the most important migratory regions.

Some feel they need to move beyond Christianity: theologian Chung Hyun Kyung writes, "Many eco-feminists reject the spirituality of traditional Western Christianity, which is based on Greek and Hellenistic dualism, hierarchy of beings and an androcentric bias....Therefore, when we incorporate African or Asian indigenous spirituality to eco-feminist spirituality, ...The earth becomes sacred....Reaffirming our commitment to the struggle of liberation of our people and

nature, we would share the symbol of a tree as the most inspiring symbol for the spirituality of eco-feminism." ²¹

While I am sympathetic to Kyung's position, I disagree that we have to move beyond Christianity. Christianity is large enough to encompass and undergird a response to environmental injustice. Foundational theological motifs to inspire work for environmental justice are: The incarnation, the suffering of Christ on the cross (as representing the suffering of the vulnerable and disenfranchised and God's suffering with them), an understanding of the goodness of the cosmos ("for God so loved the world=cosmos" [John 3:16]), the motif of the Promised Land, and Jesus' teachings about the worth of the sparrow and lily. Theologian James Cone articulated the Black Theology of Liberation as early as 1970, followed by Gustavo Gutierrez in 1973. In the forty years since, highly esteemed theologians have articulated the cry of the earth and the disenfranchised: Jurgen Moltmann, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Larry Rasmussen, Leonardo Boff, among them. As Boff writes,

"The protest of Liberation theology against suffering is not limited to a single region. Every kind of repression, every cry of the poor, of the oppressed, of the marginalized anywhere in the world is an appeal to theology. ... is it possible to live in peace and happily when you know that two-thirds of human beings are suffering, hungry and poor? It's not only the cry of the poor we must listen to but also the cry of the earth. We must do something to change the situation – there won't be a Noah's Ark to save only some of us."²²

The changes needed illumine the roots of Christianity, and we need the roots to flourish as Christian environmental justice advocates. As Luther wrote, we must distinguish the theology of the cross from the theology of glory: "That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened [Rom. 1:20]....He [or she] deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through

suffering and the cross....A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is...."²³

When Christians discover that we actually need clean water for the rite of baptism, perhaps we will wake up even more. When we invite ourselves to see the biblical cosmic Christ and the Spirit of Christ in all things, through taking to heart the description of Logos/Christ in the Prologue to the Gospel of John and Colossians 1:15-20, we will hopefully discover the preciousness of Earth's creatures. Don't we have an obligation to remember that Jesus pointed to the lilies of the field as an icon for God's care and radical faith claim that we need not think for the morrow or amass riches? Doesn't that criticize a profit economy and the greed that drives it? A mutuality is embraced by ecofeminism (as Rosemary Radford Reuther defines it: "Ecofeminism claims an alternative principle of relationship between men and women, humans and the land—a mutuality in which there is no hierarchy but rather an interconnected web of life." ²⁴). Such mutuality reminds us that Jesus was a nature mystic and eco-feminist, because those were his concerns, too.

The Earth Charter, a document created by many, many groups around the world, provides a radical blueprint for a sustainable world, and it needs more energy behind it to move from blueprints to plans.

Solutions to these problems, basic to eco-justice, may be summarized in what is a working phrase: "sustainable development." In so-called developing countries, they include empowerment of women, restoration of the environment, sustainable agriculture (rotational cropping, seed diversity, rotational grazing, organic farming, garden/farm agroecosystems, gravity flow and drip irrigation, diversified kitchen gardens), land reform, conditions of peace, and community initiative.

In many areas, eco-justice includes a substitution of "Last Values" (rural, low cost, labor-intensive, organic, small, untidy, and unpredictable) for First Values (urban, high cost, capital-intensive, large, modern, exotic). How we would do that in the First World is being explored and thought about and experimented with!

Prominent writers (e.g., development expert Paul Collier (*The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*, Jeffrey D. Sachs, who founded the Earth Institute at Columbia University) focus on sustainable development from a First World perspective. They consider how development and economies world wide can be refocused for environmental sustainability and social justice.

In this David and Goliath struggle, there are many points of light, if we look. Paul Hawken in *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming*²⁵ says that there are one to two million organizations globally working toward social justice and environmental sustainability. We can be inspired and participate in ecojustice organizations close by. Many people are modeling their lives after ecojustice principles: justice, sustainability, participation, solidarity, and sufficiency.²⁶

Do we know where the food we buy comes from? Do we know where our pensions are invested? To we contribute to time-tested organizations, such as LWR, World Wildlife Fund, Oxfam, and others? Can we take one part of the puzzle, such as water, study it, and learn how to act? I commend Celebrate for prayers for creation included each Sunday. Do we in our churches a green team and used the synod's website Green resource? Have we learned about and supported the Millennium Development goals?

If we keep minds, eyes and hearts open, we will be pulled into pain, compassion, and joy and understanding. For seminaries, churches, and all Christians, the struggle for "justice [to] roll down like waters" brings, as it always has, awareness and struggle, renewal and abundant life.

FOOTNOTES CHRISTIANITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

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- ⁶ Ibid., p. 184
- ⁷ Quoted in www.rightlivelihood.ord/chipko_speech.html.
- ⁸ Vandana Shiva, Soil Not Oil (South End Press, 2008), p. 7
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 13
- ¹⁰ Ibid, p. 41
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- ¹⁷ Ibid, p. 59.
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