



The External Environment

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Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology

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Abstract:

This volume is the second of a trilogy on the human relation to creation and the relation of the created universe to God. In it the essayists endeavor to probe the real dimensions of environmental problems like the greenhouse effect, acid rain and energy considerations and their impact on individuals and local and global society.

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Foreword:

This is the middle volume of a trilogy on the human relation to creation and the relation of the created universe (including us, of course) to God. In the first Workshop ITEST considered “the inner environment.” This was divided into three aspects: clinical investigation, health care delivery and the economics of health care. I personally found it interesting that the workshop focused on the just distribution of the fruits of what we have already accomplished rather than the pioneering work going on in the laboratory. This, I think, reflects a mentality different from that of five years ago when the accent would have been on the future. This may be a symptom of a significant cultural, and maybe religious, retreat from our once wide open preoccupation with the future. This should be of concern both to the scientific and religious communities.

This middle workshop centered on “the external environment,” that is, on all of creation external to ourselves – external to us, mind you, not separate from us. The third workshop will deal with Jewish and Christian perspectives on creation, on our part in it and on its relation to God, its creator and sustainer.

In this second workshop ITEST has endeavored to the best of its ability to learn the realistic extent of environmental problems. In any movement as broad as the environmental movement there will be a mixture of fact and fantasy, of reason and emotion, of ignorance and knowledge. In any movement in which advocacy plays a large, maybe even dominant, role, there will always be a combination of information, misinformation and disinformation. Furthermore, when an effort becomes fashionable and attracts celebrities as well as a great deal of media attention, slogans often replace thought. This meeting was held in the hope of being able to

penetrate to the real dimensions of problems like the greenhouse effect, acid rain and energy considerations and their impact on individuals and local and global society.

The attempt honestly to separate fact and fancy determined the make-up of the panel of essayists. The panel finally assembled included a physicist, an atmospheric scientist and a biologist. We recognized that the human does not live on science itself so we added two “regulators” to the mix. But the human does not live on science and regulation, so we made the mix even more interesting by fortifying it with a lawyer and a political scientist. Of the scientists, one is an academician, one a consultant to the government and the third an industrial scientist. We tried to include essayists from the more “radical” wing of the environmental movement, particularly with regard to the greenhouse effect. I must admit that I was surprised by the stipends (an order of magnitude greater than we could even consider) demanded by the superstars of the greenhouse debate. In my naivete I thought that the seriousness of the issue would keep stipends within reach in the interest of informing people and mobilizing them to work for improvement. So much for that notion! Actually, this was a blessing in disguise because, looking closer to home, we were able to enlist the expertise and help of Ben Abell.

In many respects, somewhat to my dismay rather than to my surprise, the feeling of the discussion was quite similar to that at the workshop on the inner environment. There was a tone, a perception, that we cannot multiply technological achievement without serious thought to its long-term effects both on the environment and on ourselves. I find myself ambivalent about this mood. On the one hand I personally and ITEST corporately have promoted a search for meaning in the welter of scientific and technological advance. That is our main goal. On the other hand, that search has been conducted in a radical openness to advance. I hope I am wrong, but I am beginning to find a sense of disillusionment with science and technology in our society. I think some of that was present in this meeting.

There are voices in our society that seem not to want to set reasonable limits to our scientific and technological efforts but want to retreat from our present levels of development. I personally am concerned about that sense of retreat. Nonetheless, in the March 1991 workshop on “Christian and Jewish perspectives `on the creation” we shall, from a Christian view, have to cope with the “limits” of a redeemed world, the world in which God became incarnate and remains with us in the church. These “limits” are really opportunities in that they provide the true dimensions of the world in which the Kingdom of God is growing.

It seems as if we are seeing the beginnings of a sea change in our approach to significant issues arising from the accelerating advances in science and technology during the last thirty to fifty years. I would hesitate to make a firm prediction on the basis of only two meetings, but this is a phenomenon worth watching. In the famous words of one of our members “we’ll know more later.” Perhaps that phrase is an antidote to a loss of nerve either socially or religiously – we’ll always learn, if we care to do so.

I want to congratulate and thank our essayists for their fine work before and during this workshop. They contributed a great deal from their expertise in areas like climatology, energy, the Clean Air Act of 1990 and acid rain, law, political science, biotechnology and waste management. More, they contributed a great deal of themselves, of their humor and of their concern for the planet and its people. They deserve the thanks of all of us. As you will note as you read this volume, there are no interventions from Ms Nancy Kete of the Environmental Protection Agency. As coincidence would have it, Congress finally got around to debating the Clean Air Act of 1990 on the very weekend of the workshop. Ms Kete had to remain in Washington to testify in behalf of the Bill and we were consequently (and unfortunately) deprived of her input.

I would also like to thank the participants for their patience, their humor (much of which has been edited out of the Proceedings to save space) and their charity toward each other and toward me. Let me tell you why we must save space: we can bulk-mail these books only if they are less than a pound. So, in one sense, beyond 170 pages I have to edit by weight. Actually, this gives a tighter edit and one, I think, easier to read. I wish, also to thank the staff (Sister Marianne Postiglione, RSM and Sister Rosemarie Przybylowicz, OSF) for their

dedicated behind-the-scenes work. This effort, never seen and rarely adverted to, is absolutely indispensable to a successful meeting. Finally, I would thank the ITEST Board of Directors for their continuing promotion of the work of the group.

Robert A. Brungs, SJ
Director: ITEST
March, 1991