



The Inner Environment

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Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology

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Abstract:

This volume is the first in a trilogy on “environmental” issues. The term environmental is used rather broadly to describe issues treated here. The focus centers on two basic topics: the ethics involved in life and death decisions and the just distribution of what we already have rather than the pioneering work going on in the laboratory.

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Foreword:

This is the first workshop in a series of three, culminating in a workshop (March, 1991) on “Christian Understandings of Creation.” There is, as we all know, great concern about the health of the planet and a serious need to refashion our way of life in view of the damage that we are doing to natural systems. The ITEST Board of Directors decided that we should begin this treatment of environmental concerns with a workshop on the theme of human health. We shall then move on to the environment external to the human, the land, air and water. We shall consider both the use and abuse of these natural systems which form the necessary bases for life on earth.

Many years ago, Dr. Harry Boardman, speaking about biomedical ethics at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), remarked:

But far too pervasively, these endless biomedical-science-value discussion manifest a deplorable blindness which seems to proceed from an hypnotic fascination with appliances and appliance makers. . . . The central concern is not with science or scientist, but with the whole of knowledge -- its benefits, the price it exacts, and its special province: that of ideas. For ideas far afield from science and technology may be the most lethal. Inspiration to man’s action lies not in his appliances -- as much as they may encourage or inhibit it -- but in the spell of ideas and the conviction of mind and heart which they generate.

This last remark bears a haunting resemblance to St. Augustine’s realization that human action flows from our deepest love. During this series of workshops we shall be working toward an articulation of those deepest loves in a world redeemed in the blood of Christ.

In many ways we are off to a strange but fascinating start with this set of Proceedings. The participants were clearly interested in two basic topics -- the ethics involved in life and death decisions and how we are going to afford continued high level health care for everybody. Even though the ethical, in my mind, is not the important

aspect, of the problems we face, it is a neuralgic point. People do want to consider it. It is at one and the same time the most difficult aspect of modern life, in that the hardest cases demand all the attention. In fact, this is my greatest difficulty with ethics. It is almost always focused on rare events. It is also a way to escape serious scrutiny of the very basic underlying truths which, if investigated, would demand a strong allegiance to a very definite view of reality. In the case of the Christian, a serious attempt to understand the basic biblical and traditional truths of the faith cannot but lead to a commitment to the person of Christ. This in turn mandates that we go forth and preach this Good News to all people and peoples. This evangelical mission seems to be particularly difficult for us and for our contemporaries. After all we don't want to "impose our consciences" on others. There seems to be little willingness to recognize that preaching (and living) the Good News is not an imposition of conscience but an invitation to share in the Word of life.

Be all that as it may, the participants showed great concern for the just distribution of health care in the context of growing financial limitation. A significant part of the "mood" of the conference was limitation. It seems that we finally realize that we cannot do everything, that there are social and economic realities that form the basis for considerations of the paths to be followed. In physics, we would call these boundary conditions. They form the context (or the field) in which a solution can and must be reached. In brief they define the parameters of the problem. Inside these boundaries what do we want to do and what can we do? This, of course, demands the raising of the question: why do we want to do it? We didn't get very far into this last question, but it will recur in the workshop on the external environment and it will have to be explicitly treated in the workshop on Christian understanding.

I personally found it quite interesting that the focus of the workshop was the just distribution of what we already have rather than the pioneering work going on in the laboratory. I do not believe that would have been the case three or four years ago. In his book, *The Discovery of the Amazon*, John Adams describes how in his efforts to reach the source of the river before the rains made progress impossible, he forced his native bearers to double their daily march. Then one morning, he came out to find them all squatting outside their tents, immobile, immovable. "We have been moving too fast," they explained. "We must now wait for our souls to catch up with our bodies."

This seems to be the position in which we find ourselves now. We have been moving very fast, seemingly unmindful that we live in a world and in a society that demand "limit thinking." We have hailed every new discovery with an almost childish pride without considering the effects it would have on our lives. We have begun to see the downside of some of our greatest triumphs, e. g., our ability to keep people alive beyond their time. Now we must learn how to dispose of them humanely and morally. It is indeed time to let our souls catch up. I sensed that mood at this workshop.

I suspect (and at this point it can only be a suspicion) that we shall see the same mood at our October Workshop on the external environment, a recognition that we cannot simply multiply technological achievement without serious thought of its long term effects both on the environment and on ourselves. We must, in Boardman's words, resist an hypnotic fascination with appliances and appliance makers. In the March, 1991 Workshop we shall clearly have to cope with the "limits" of a redeemed world, the world in which God became incarnate and remains with us, incarnate in the church. These "limits" really are opportunities in that they provide the true dimensions for the growth of the Kingdom.

It would seem, though one cannot predict with certitude, that this workshop shows the beginning of a sea change in approach to significant issues. Certainly, one cannot make a firm prediction on the basis of one event. As Father Don Keefe says so often: "We'll know more later."

I do want to congratulate and thank our essayists for "yeo-person" work on this workshop. They contributed a great deal from their expertise in the area of medicine, health care delivery and economics. More, they

contributed a great deal of themselves, especially their humor and their obvious concern for people. It was a contentious meeting in some respect, but carried out in an atmosphere of deep concern and great patience and charity. They deserve the thanks of all of us. So, too, do the participants, and for the same reasons. I personally have thanked the staff for their dedicated behind the scenes work. This effort, never seen and rarely adverted to, is absolutely indispensable to a successful meeting.

Robert A. Brungs, SJ
Director: ITEST
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