

7/12/2021

Social Justice/Eco-Justice:

Thinking and Acting from Nature (Part 1)

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The link between religion, environment and social justice is a complex one, and no doubt one to which there is no single answer. But the question needs to be asked. For while the secularization thesis argued that religion would diminish as a force for understanding and explaining the cosmos, in fact we have seen, if anything, the revival of religion as, at least, an identity conferring and politically motivating force in the contemporary world. Whether or not this converts into action in terms of addressing the pressing planetary problems that now confront us, is another issue. Belief in other words, does not necessarily translate into practice. Indeed, it may retard it, by suggesting that at least a privileged number of us are already "saved", that what is, is what is intended to be (by some higher power), or that only "spiritual" methods can be of any use in mediating our relationship to the world, and that political or material intervention is useless.

There are, of course, many voices that refuse to acknowledge this passivity, or even nihilism, and would argue, to the contrary, that it is only right-directed spiritual action that can work to seriously transform this broken world, and that spirituality is far from being other-worldly, but is deeply rooted in political and economic action, provided that these are also transformed and break away from the older conventional and "business as usual" models with which we are familiar, and which are, in fact, very much part of the problem, and unlikely to offer the creative solutions and fresh thinking that are so urgently needed. Many solutions to this have been offered, including alternative thinking in such fields as economics, environmental studies, development studies, sustainability thinking, in the "Transition" movement addressing the need for creative thinking and action as we face "energy descent" as oil reserves diminish and as coal becomes unacceptable because of its polluting qualities, in agriculture (particularly in the areas of organic farming and permaculture), in architecture, urban planning, in the arts, and in social movements working for societal transformations in social justice, gender, race and legal systems. Taken together, Paul Hawken has argued that these collectively constitute the biggest social movement that the world has even seen. This is certainly true, yet structural change seems slow in coming. Much of the economy rushes on along its unsustainable course, authoritarian governments seem everywhere to be increasing, wars, violence and conflicts have not diminished, forms of long fought for social security are being rolled back in the name of austerity policies, governments everywhere seem to spend far less on education and healthcare than they do on their militaries, climate change continues to gather pace even though the science is quite clear about what is happening and the social and economic consequences well documented. At the time of writing, the entire world is gripped by the biggest pandemic that it has ever experienced at least since the great influenza epidemic of 1918-19 or possibly since the medieval Black Death, although the latter was confined mostly to Europe. We know too that the current pandemic was almost certainly induced by human factors, even if it crossed to the human sphere from a natural agent.

Something fundamental has clearly gone wrong, not only in our allowing the world-system to unravel in such chaotic and destructive ways on our watch as the saying goes, but in our inability to "think" the problem - to evolve modes of consciousness that actually address the world as it now exists, not as our largely outdated models from/of the past, and which have clearly failed, formulated their solutions. How might we begin to do this? There are several levels to the answer. The first is that we can mine the spiritual traditions of the past for the insights that they might offer for the present predicament. Some religious traditions have been doing this for some time, but rarely as a mainstream part of their teaching and practice - exceptions being such movements as Catholic "Liberation Theology" and its inspiration for parallel movements in Judaism and even in some areas of Hinduism, "Engaged Buddhism", Quakerism in Protestant Christianity, and other movements that might be gathered under the umbrella term of "socially engaged religion". The one area in which there has been substantial rethinking and self-examination has been that of the environment, where there has been an outpouring of concern and attempts to engage traditional religious thinking and practice with the deepening ecological crisis across almost the whole religious spectrum, and the parallel rediscovery of "native" or indigenous spiritual and ritual traditions, many of which have long had an intimate and positive relationship to the natural environment.

A second is to reformulate our “philosophical anthropology” – our understanding of our place in the total cosmos and the ways in which this reflects on our ways of being in the world. Clearly at the moment, many of our ways of being-in-the-world are negative and highly destructive, or at the very least, thoughtless. Our taken-for-granted ways of living may in fact be far from benign – excessive consumption, flying, and driving, eating habits that promote not only poor nutrition, but are ecologically damaging, promote cruelty to animals, and contribute to pollution and climate change, our fashion habits (the fashion industry is one of the most polluting and wasteful of any industry), mindless leisure practices including the consumption of forms of popular culture which are violent, sexist, racist or in other ways promote socially negative attitudes, addiction to advertising, energy waste, and any number of other less than ideal practices that actually, in the long run if not the short, actually diminish the quality of life for ourselves or others. One thing that the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed to us is our vulnerability, and the fact that the perception of this cannot promote selfishness if we are to survive, but rather a much deeper sense of interdependence, not only as individuals, but on a planetary scale: what happens in one part of the world sooner or later effects the rest and there really is nowhere to hide.

One significant attempt to do this has come from the work of Achille Mbembe, who has formulated a powerful argument against what he calls “necro-politics” in which the key elements are the expansion of any notion of geography to encompass the whole world, not simply the nation-state, the key idea that the “terrestrial condition was never the unique lot of humans” and is likely to become even less so as climate change and ecological disaster forces on us the realization that we are an integral part of nature, not somehow above or apart from it, and that the recognition of our vulnerability need not lead to nihilism if we grasp correctly our place in the totality of things. This, according to Mbembe, requires the development of what he calls an “ethic of the passerby”, the uncomfortable but necessary recognition that our status on the Earth is one of “journeying, movement and transfiguration” and of “passage, crossing and movement” and the acceptance of the idea that life is intrinsically flowing and transient. The paradoxical result is not one of indifference to the state of the world, but rather of a new form of “presence” leading ideally to new forms of solidarity and community – that we are citizens not of a particular place, but of the whole. Vulnerability then becomes not a sign of weakness, but of the need for strengthening and creating new connections – a new community – that is aligned with the true nature of things, to become, as it were, an active part of the evolutionary purpose, not an agent in thwarting it. The notion of the ‘passerby” then roots a philosophical anthropology in vulnerability and impermanence, and forces us to “listen” to the Earth instead of endlessly and fruitlessly trying to manage it, control it and direct it. What is it saying to us and how do we respond to these messages?

Often today these kinds of issues are collected under the rubric of “sustainability”. For, as the artist David Maggs and environmental scientist John Robinson suggest in their book on the relationship of art to social transformation, modernist models of control, predictability and management have failed: “Rather than continuing to secure increasing levels of certainty, command and control over the world, they offer growing uncertainty, indecision, and disempowerment instead. Rather than a challenge *for* Western, Modernist rationality, it seems increasingly clear that the sustainability crisis entails a challenge *to* such rationality”. On the basis of this, they go on to argue that sustainability cannot be “solved” or achieved through our present ways of understanding – of either ourselves or of the larger world. If this is so, where do we begin our search for alternative answers? One pathway they suggest is through the work of Bruno Latour who has suggested that the world is actually composed of ontological hybridities or “entanglements”, entities that do not fit comfortably in Modernist categories of clear natural, social or technical boundaries. Latour’s proposal is to replace a hierarchical model of ontological relationships with a “flat” one – one in which entities of very different kinds (animals, weather, natural features and even culture) occupy an equal plane of ontology. This certainly radically deconstructs any notion of human uniqueness or superiority, or indeed any notion of the cultural superiority of one culture over others, or indeed of one race or gender over others. This idea of “ontological flattening” Latour summarizes in the concept of the “democracy of actors”. The playing field between natural facts and cultural facts is thus levelled and a new basis for discourse created.

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