

Last Call For a Sustainable Future?

July 24, 2006

Bill McKibben, author of *The End of Nature*, has a piece in the latest issue of the *National Geographic* (August 2006) which introduces the lead article on the upcoming hurricane season and a look at how some of those affected last year have fared. McKibben's concern is global warming and the disaster that is looming ahead of us!not in our grandchildren's lifetime, but in ours. In the middle of his article, he asks the religious community to become involved in saving God's creation while there may still be time. Here is a well-known scientist, writing in a serious journal, suggesting that people of faith have the key to solving the major problem of our time.

He posits that what has brought us to this disaster is that most decisions made since the dawn of the Scientific Revolution have been based on economic principles!e.g., what would earn the most money in the shortest period of time. A paradigm shift must occur so that decisions hereafter are made on what is best for the community at large. The faith community, he feels, is the apt place to start this new trend.

More and more attention is being given to these issues. The problem is expertly presented in Al Gore's film, "An Inconvenient Truth," and a book by the same name is available at local bookstores. See a discussion guide at www.eco-justice.org. A commercial film, now available on video, entitled "The Day After Tomorrow" presents in harrowing detail a plausible scenario of what could happen should we allow rampant global warming. A 15-minute

DVD from the Union of Concerned Scientists (510...) and an 82-minute DVD from Stonehaven Productions (212-396-9464) also address these issues.

What has the religious community to do with all this? Some of us believe that only a change of heart, a fundamental conversion, a radical shift of priorities will deliver humanity from its suicidal plunge into chaos. The experts tell us that the year 2050 is the point of no return. If we have not stabilized the atmosphere by then billions of people will be drowned or frozen to death. There will be no reprieve.

Bill McKibben summarizes his appeal to the five million subscribers to the *National Geographic*: "We need ? a convivial environmentalism, one that asks us to figure out what we really want out of life ? [with] a new link to communities of faith ? churches, synagogues and mosques.? Their political help is crucial for making necessary legislative change.? Environmentalism has to pay as much attention to preachers and sociologists as it does to scientists."

Having spent the last 35 years working with others to raise God's creation as a major theological category in the life of the congregations, I can report very little progress. Occasionally you hear a sermon or sing "This Is My Father's World" or "For the Beauty of the Earth". There are some faith-based organizations (I belong to several myself) dealing with these issues, but with a few exceptions the religious community has only been heard peripherally in the struggle to save the environment.

If it were otherwise, Bill McKibben would not be asking us to come alive and speak out. In 1970 John Cobb published a little book entitled *Is It Too Late?* where he gave the religious communities ten years to wake up the society to the environment crisis. That was over three decades ago. It may be too late now, but what choice do we have? Better late than never.

What is actually needed is a massive change in the economies of nations, plus new business models!and perhaps new political models. Please use your good offices to encourage the individuals and institutions with which you are connected to begin the shift to a "convivial environmentalism," to lifestyles based on the centrality of the local community, to the soft energy path (solar and wind instead of petroleum and nuclear), to peaceful resolution of international conflicts (no more war) and to a sustainable future for our children who will bless us for our consideration of them and their children.

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Rev. Albert G. Cohen, July 7, 2006

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THE WORDS GLOBAL WARMING FALL ON DEAF EARS

Last week's *Los Angeles Times* carried an op-ed piece by Daniel Gilbert, Harvard University psychologist, offering his opinion on why people cannot hear the warning about global warming. He suggests four explanations. (1) Our brains are wired to see threats from people like dictators, kidnappers, robbers with guns, people who look and act dangerous and make us afraid. (2) We are schooled to react when people offend our morals, violate taboos, raise in us righteous indignation and make us angry. (3) We respond to a sense of immediate danger, like catching sight of a baseball about to hit us in the head making us feel the need to duck or get out of the way. (4) Sudden change excites our adrenalin and gets our attention. On the other hand, we are lulled to sleep by the slow rate of climate change or boast about human adaptability to harsh surroundings.

Beyond these interesting and plausible observations I believe there are three additional reasons for the apathy. (1) We need categories in order to conceptualize anything. It is reported that some indigenous people were literally unable to see the ships of the 16th century explorers because ships and sails were outside their experience. Many 21st century locals cannot imagine the total destruction of the natural cycles which have been in place for millennia, nor conceive of an earth fragile enough to be threatened by the detritus of ten billion human beings. To talk of such matters is to speak a foreign language. (2) There are millions of religious fanatics hoping and praying for a global catastrophe so Jesus will come back in our lifetime and take the faithful directly to heaven. Scriptures are replete with warnings about such sick and perverted thinking. These same folk have blithely explained to me that the loss of humanity on earth is of small consequence to God who can create life on other planets if this one doesn't work out (3) Then we cannot forget the hundreds of millions so immediately impacted by their own problems (illness, hunger and violence--to name three) that it requires all their energy and attention to subsist from day to day.

I can only conclude that after all these exceptions there remains a large body of the world's population, many in positions of influence, who are equipped to engage the issue of global warming. They can provide the desperately needed leadership right now. Therefore let's elect candidates for office who have our vision of today's challenges to our future. We can reduce our own carbon footprint by walking, driving a hybrid vehicle, using minimum electricity and conserving. We can reinforce the implications of global warming whenever/wherever possible for the sake of our grandchildren who will live through or perish in the consequences of our inaction.

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(See "Inconvient Truth")