James Miller

RELIGION, ECOLOGY & THE FUTURE OF THE HUMAN SPECIES

Queen’s University
1. Environmental Problems in Rural Areas
2. The Ecological Crisis and the Culture of Modernity
1. ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS
PROBLEMS FOR HUMANS

- Around the world human beings are experiencing environmental problems

- The most familiar problems are:
  1. Global Climate Change
  2. Water Shortage
  3. Air Pollution
INDIRECT PROBLEMS

Aside from the problems that directly affect human beings, environmental scientists also see other problems:

1. Total encroachment of human beings on the surface of the earth
2. Destruction of wildlife habitats
3. Species extinction beyond the normal background rate
SOCIAL COSTS

- Environmental problems have social costs
  1. The rich isolate themselves from environmental problems by downloading them on to the poor
  2. Leads to creation of social imbalances based not on wealth but access to natural resources and healthy environments
  3. The environment is a justice issue.
News reports of mass rioting in rural areas in China in 2005

“About 60,000 people came to the village of Huaxi (Zhejiang province) to protest against high, local levels of pollution. The demonstrators said they would not budge until the government either moved or closed the 13 chemical plants which have polluted the water and ground around the village.”
March 19, 2005 New York Times report on Thai fishermen losing their livelihoods on the Mekong river because of hydro-electric power stations built upstream in China

“Ted Osius, once a senior White House adviser to Vice President Al Gore, suggests that an unchecked China could turn the Mekong into an ecological disaster, akin to the Yellow River and the Yangtze River.”
Rural areas share a similar set of problems:

1. they are required to supply food and natural resources at the cheapest price

2. they are required to absorb the environmental costs associated with industrial agriculture

3. they are the recipients of environmental downloading from urban sectors
Stability, harmony and prosperity are the result of balance.

There is a rural-urban environmental imbalance.

Environmental downloading exacerbates social imbalances.

This threatens the stability, security and prosperity of human civilizations.
II. THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS AND THE CULTURE OF MODERNITY
THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

The ecological crisis:

1. is the underlying cause of environmental problems

2. stems from a failure to comprehend the way human life is inscribed within nature

3. is rooted in a secular, humanistic tradition that developed in Europe over the past 300 years
1. Symptoms and Causes

- Current environmental problems are symptoms of a deeper ecological crisis.
- Dealing with environmental problems requires:
  1. Remediation: attending to the symptoms
  2. Radical rethinking: addressing the cause
2. Failure to Understand

The sciences of ecology and evolutionary biology now demonstrate the ways that human life is embedded in the evolving life-processes of the planet.

Evolutionary science demonstrates the historical relatedness of species.

Ecological science demonstrates the present interdependence of species and environments.
SCIENCE AND ECONOMICS

- There is a mismatch between science and economics.
- Ecological science tells us that we are porous beings whose life depends on nature.
- Economics tells us that nature is a resource; it has only external value.
- Our value system is behind the times. We are solve 21st century problems with 18th century thinking.
The Culture of Modernity

- Why is our value system behind the times?
- People lack scientific education
- Globalization means that people can remain blissfully unaware of the ecological consequences of their actions
- The culture of modernity has hegemonic status.
3. ASPECTS OF MODERNITY

- Two aspects of the culture of modernity are relevant to the ecological crisis.

  1. Instrumental rationality
  2. Faith in progress
3.1 Instrumental Rationality

- Instrumental rationality means the creation of rational procedures for achieving rational ends.
- A process is deemed to be rational if it achieves its goal with precision and efficiency.
- Instrumental rationality does not consider whether the goal is desirable or whether the process creates ‘collateral damage’.
The use of animals as test subjects for drugs and cosmetics is an example of instrumental rationality.

Those who conduct experiments on animals rationalize the suffering that they inflict upon animals.

Suffering is deemed an unfortunate but necessary means to an important end.
This way of thinking has important consequences.

The natural world is seen as a resource for humans to exploit as efficiently as possible.

Nature is not valued as an end in itself, only as a means to an end.

Colonialism and the exploitation of nature are valid means of securing human well-being.
“The idea of progress embodies the faith ... that the advance that has occurred in science can be replicated in ethics and politics.”

John Gray, “An Illusion with a Future”
*Daedalus*, Summer 2004, p. 10
A SECULAR FAITH

- The ideology of progress is a secular form of Christian faith
- It believes in the hope of a future salvation
- Salvation is brought about not by the hand of any god but by human hands
- Knowledge is our god and technology is our saviour
The one-sided nature of progress leads to an excess of knowledge and a deficit of wisdom.

This fact is well-documented throughout the world’s literature and mythology.
THE TRUTH OF PROGRESS

- The Genesis myth depicts Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the garden of Eden as irrevocable.
- This speaks to an aspect of the truth of progress.
- Knowledge cannot go backwards; we cannot put the genie back in the bottle.
The Lie of Progress

- The Genesis myth also speaks to the truth that knowledge does not result in salvation.
- In modern term, scientific progress does not advance human freedom.
- Progress only advances human power.
- The central question for human beings is what to do with the power that we create for ourselves.
RELIGION, ECOLOGY AND THE FUTURE OF THE HUMAN SPECIES
The predicament that faces humanity, whether in terms of ecology or war, is that of increasing power.

As the population increases and resources diminish, the only thing of which we can be certain is that wars over oil, water, and arable land will become more intense as more countries acquire more powerful weapons (John Gray).
In his article, John Gray is not hopeful that there can be a solution to the problem of the wisdom deficit.

“I am sure it would be better if we had a vision of progress that respected the limits of Earth. ... Yet I have come to doubt that such theoretical constructions can ever prevail against the power of human passions. When vital necessities appear threatened, humans will act as they have always done: They will try to secure them now—even if the result is war, and the ruin of all.”
Despite John Gray’s misgivings, he does note that our faith in progress is a cultural phenomenon that may turn out to be a historical curiosity.

“Who now remembers Mithraism, or the curious faith of the Gnostics? These religions sustained and consoled millions of people over many centuries, only to vanish almost without trace.”

The one thing that is certain about our culture is that it will change.
THE CONCEPT OF LIMITS

- In the theology of progress, the concept of limitation is heresy.
- Yet religion and ecology share the notion of limit.
The concept of ecological limits is not new.

Ecosystems have limits to the amount of human-induced pollution that they can absorb.

Ecosystems have limits to the change that they can tolerate.

Limits are natural functions of ecosystems. They are different from targets set by politicians.
Some religious theologies focus on omnipotent divine beings and suggest the possibility of transcending the world. Natural limits do not apply to gods.

On the other hand religious traditions propose spiritual disciplines and ethical codes by which people voluntarily limit their freedom in order to attain some religious goal.

The earth itself proposes limits for our ethical systems.
The Future of Religion

- Religion will only have a future if human beings have a future.
- Human beings will only have a future if the earth has a future.
- We cannot go to Mars.
- The earth is our home.
Religion: The New Heresy

- Religious traditions may seem conservative and ‘traditional’ by nature
- However, in a secular, humanistic culture, religions function as repositories of alternative ‘heretical’ worldviews and ethical wisdom
- The task for religious people is to make these resources available widely
We must recover a sense of the earth as our home

Home as the place that protects us, the place that nurtures us, the place to which we belong, the place to which we return.
In an age of disasters, earthquakes, tidal waves, SARS and BSE to trust the earth as home requires a leap of faith.

What we can do to nurture this sense of trust, this sense of place, this sense of living on earth as if we intend to stay?