

Making Polders: Social Communication, Religion, and the Global Environmental Crisis

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Abstract

This paper examines the nexus between social communication, religion and the global environmental crisis and is based on the ideas of the philosopher Ervin Laszlo. I locate social communication and religion in relation to new approaches to tackling global environmental problems. This paper also calls for the need for a macroshift in social communication and religion. This will be based on a shift in worldviews from a logos driven to a holos driven evolution.

Keywords: religion, social communication, macroshift, environment, polders

Introduction

In his book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive* (2005) Jared Diamond discusses the way in which several past societies became extinct due to poor ecological practices. These included Sumeria, Mohanjo Daro, Anasazi, Norse Greenland, Maya, Easter Island, Mangareva, and Henderson Island. For example, in the case of Easter Island its inhabitants had totally deforested the island. Alternately, the Norse colonies in Greenland were unable to adapt to the harsh conditions of the land, unlike the Inuit. In Sumeria, poor irrigation practices over centuries had removed the top soil which hardened the ground to such an extent that it was unsuitable to growing cereal crops. In each case, the society had depleted its environmental resources. The point here is that their cosmologies had somehow failed them. Their religions were unable to exercise correct ecological management practices. Why was this? All of the mentioned societies had pervasive cosmologies which had sacralised the environment. However, the socio-cultural evolution of these societies had been unable to communicate their religious beliefs to ecological management. Diamond says that this is synonymous to “landscape amnesia” or a “tragedy of the commons” (2005: 426, 428). The philosopher Ervin Laszlo would subscribe this to the adherence to “malign myths” which view the environment as a limitless “source of resources” (Laszlo 2001:61). The fall of these societies signifies an inability to anticipate the future and flawed reasoning.

The aim of this paper is to examine social communication, religion, and environmentalism in the 21st century. This is vital due to global warming, anthropogenic climate change, deforestation, pollution, and biodiversity loss. This essay will be based mainly on the ideas of Ervin Laszlo. In the first section I locate social communication and religion in relation to needing new approaches to tackling global environmental problems. The second section

calls for a macrosift in social communication and religion. This will be based on a shift in worldviews from a logos driven to a holos driven evolution. The third section will offer ways in which social communication and religion can be positioned to challenging environmental problems.

Challenges to Social Communication and Religion

According to Laszlo, human relations with nature are unsustainable. The globalisation of capitalist market practices and social communication is uneven and disparate (Laszlo 2001:40). Additionally, there is a need for non-pathological interpretations of religion which are more ecologically centred (Kakar 1991:68; Kaplan 1963; Gruntip 1969; Homans 1970). In this way, religious experience can be contoured towards a new mythos which incorporates both human and non-human species. This is kernel to Laszlo et al. A central part of Laszlo's idea of a new mythos is based on creating different kinds of social communication in the 21st century which are aligned with ecological concerns. These will be discussed in this paper later on.

For Laszlo, this period in human evolution is characterized by excess which is Oedipul in its dimension. Carrol (2000) reminds us that modern humans are like the mythical Oedipus who was adroit in answering riddles yet was unable to anticipate the horrific nature of his actions. Carrol further contends that the excesses in Rwanda, Bosnia, Sudan, Chechnya, Timor, Zimbabwe, Central America, Sierre Leone, and the Congo testify to modern human savagery and inability to escape from the suare of violence. The global scale of violence manifests a fundamental breakdown in social communication at two levels:

1. The global arms trade has enabled repressive regimes and clandestine militant groups access to arms which violate human rights and environmental laws. The Global Arms trade is estimated at \$40 billion per annum. In 2000, armed conflicts left 24 million refugees from 28 countries. Many of these refugees fall victim to human caused famines such as in Sudan and Ethiopia. Furthermore, refugees invariably invade other countries to flee from their morbid circumstances. Refugees are often unwanted since they are a drain on the limited resources of their poor host nations leading to further breakdown in social communication.
2. The global escalation of violence and conflict represents the failure of the United Nations and nation states to mitigate global arms manufacture and trade. United Nations charter on human and environmental rights is often flouted by lack of universal regulations. Moreover, global technologies have diminished border integrity, enabling fundamentalist and militant groups to communicate their ideologies via cyberspace, thereby threatening the social order of nation states.

Social communication has been further eroded in relation to organised religion. While the world's major religions are universal in their fostering of harmonious relations with the non-human world, the daily praxis of most believers is beset in an amnesiac state when it comes to ecological propriety. In other words, there is an apparent hiatus between ideology and practice. Spiritual ideas based on stewardship of nature as found in the Judaeo-Christian texts have not been encouraged. One reason for this has been due to over population and incremental poverty which has plagued the developing world. By 2050, the human global

population will be between 9 to 10 billion people. This combined with ambivalent climate change, dwindling resources, worldwide biodiversity loss, deforestation, and massive decline in arable land will raise new threats to the planet (Brown 2001:59). Again, global policy makers have failed to communicate positive changes to billions of poor people who must eek out their daily existence. Global poverty is also a manifestation of the inability of organised religion to provide an alternative approach to global markets and technologies which are associated with ecological degradation.

Diamond tells us that poor responses to religious knowledge have influenced ecological destruction. He cites that the Easter Islanders deforested the entire island in order to transport hundreds of gigantic statues as objects of veneration (Diamond 2005:432). Also, the Greenland Norse's conservative interpretation of Christian values resisted their ability to adopt Inuit ways of living in the harsh landscape (Diamond:2005:432). Various eco-theologians and feminist writers have also blamed the Biblical scriptures for encouraging an anthropocentric worldview at the exclusion of the non-human world. In Callicott's terms Christian missionaries undermined cultures during European imperialism and encouraged the colonisers' ethic of greed (Callicott 2001:83).

This excessive view of human importance has been vehicled by existentialist and materialistic schools of thought (Rupp 2001:25). For instance, the philosopher Martin Heidegger contends that modern humans view the world mainly as *techne* – a product of human assertion which is devoid of meaning; a view which Heidegger calls “night world.”

In Thomas Berry's words, the non-human world is "our primary revelatory experience" (Berry 1988). Destruction of our natural habitat surmounts to a sin which permanently restricts human understanding of the Divine (McElroy 2001: 33). He goes on to state: "The earth is our origin, our nourishment, our support, our guide. Our spirituality itself is earth-derived. If there is no spirituality in the earth, then there is no spirituality in ourselves" (Berry 1990). Certainly this sentiment needs to be communicated by religious institutions to the masses with greater zeal. McFague notes that religious institutions have been unable to speak against the neo-classical economic model, but have through their insouciance been complicit with it (2001:137).

Social Communication and the Macroshift

According to Laszlo, humanity is presently poised towards a macroshift, from a logos-inspired evolution to a holos-inspired evolution. The former is characterised by movement on a horizontal plane, conquering cultures and colonizing territories (Laszo 2001:111). Logos-inspired evolution is also characterised by the dominator principle in which competition and individualism are the governing leitmotifs of societies. These leitmotifs are promulgated by global medias to such an extent that they have become normalised and unchallenged. Competitive and consumer based ideals are socially communicated in everyday metaphors. For example, Grossman (1999) avers that many common metaphors in English concern growth and quantity. Quantity characterises the "technological bodily comportment" of modern denizens due to our governance by technology (James 2002).

What growth as metaphor and as politics conceals most are the social relations, the investments, the technologies and production processes which the controllers of growth utilize to maintain their control and cause harm (Grossman 1999).

Extensive evolution which is logos orientated is posited on sovereignty of natural resources and manipulation of people towards generating higher levels of consumption (Laszlo 2001:111). In this way, social communication is economically driven at the expense of social ties. This is exemplified by coffee cash crops in Rwanda. When world trade prices in coffee collapsed in the early 1990's many Rwandans were economically affected due to their reliance on coffee crops. Consequently, the slump in coffee prices escalated unemployment and reduced farm incomes and social spending which increased social tensions between Rwandans (Messer & Cohen 2001). This led to a total breakdown in social communication between Hutu and Tutsi Rwandans, resulting in the genocide of Tutsis in 1994.

Alternately, holos-inspired evolution is intensive driven and privileges "interpersonal communication, as all communication in nature, is made possible by connection" (Laszlo 2001:113). This form of communication involves a high level of consciousness in order for people from diverse backgrounds to connect. The subtle levels of communication (a feature of intense consciousness) is crucial to our future evolution since it re-orientates our ego-centred worldviews to a "planet centered dimension" (Laszlo 2001:113). The emergence of the global cybernet is emblematic of the over arching aims of intensive evolution as it has enabled millions of people to create a planetary "noosphere" to coin Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, - a converging field of consciousness which offers an unprecedented site for human creativity. The global cybernet presents a positive feedback system which enables for new kinds of sociality and communication.

Religion has a central role in the holos-inspired evolution. The 21st century will host the emergence of new kinds of spirituality or reformulate the ancient religious traditions. In his seminal work, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James discusses the human sense of union with a greater and “meaningful reality” (Laszlo 2001:123). For Rudolph Otto, this higher reality is the source of *mysterium et tremendum*, as it empowers believers with a new vision of the world. The visions of the spiritual founders of religions are examples of holos-inspired evolution (Laszlo 2001:123).

The reconciliation between traditional religion and “inner-directed spirituality” will require a reinterpretation of religion’s role, or a “new story” as Thomas Berry calls it (Laszlo 2001:124). This “new story” views the universe as a sacred community in which it moves towards self awareness and consciousness. The myriads of living beings testify to the autopoietic quality of cosmic life. Social communication is a feature of cosmic complexity and creativity and its journey towards “inner directed spirituality.”

Conclusion: “Making Polders.” New Ways of Social Communication and Religion

As a way of explicating my ideas for this section I want to use the idea of the polder as a principle method in social communication and environmentalism. Diamond (2005:519) tells us that up to one fifth of the Netherlands is below sea level, and has been reclaimed by pumping out sea water. The reclaimed lands called “polders” consist of sequences of pumps which conjoin different households. This system necessitates friendly relations and good

will since any mismanagement of pumps means that sea water will inundate the land (Diamond 2005:519). In this system social communication is primary. Consequently, the Dutch are acutely aware in maintaining a collective environmental consciousness in order to protect their environment. Polders are the integument of Dutch environmental consciousness.

Diamond's analogy of the "world as a polder" is fitting in explicating the role of religious institutions and environmentalism in the 21st century. The power of religion has been its ability to communicate moral issues via various symbols. The power of morality is par excellence in "invoking a countervailing force" for greater democracy (Mombiot 2003:114). Mombiot contends that the moral power of the masses can act a policing force against the rapaciousness of un-environmental organisations. The power of a collective moral force is evinced by the World Social Forum which was held in Allegre, Brazil in 2002. Up to 50,000 people had gathered at the forum which also attracted many international politicians (Mombiot 2003:95; Wainwright 2002). Such was the moral power of the forum that it had denied an offer from the president of the World Bank to speak there (Mombiot 2003:95-96).

In addition, Mombiot's endorsement for a "global justice movement" aligns with holos-inspired evolution. Along these lines religious institutions can be at the forefront of setting up ethical agendas with NGOs (non-government organizations). This would be an important alliance due to the universal nature of NGOs as representing a powerful alternative global force in challenging governments. Religious institutions can re-position themselves as

dynamic players in environmental issues via the auspices of NGOs as a global communication force.

Another role of religious institutions would be to further encourage distributive justice and the equitable allocation of resources to the poor. This idea reflects Dietrich Bonhoeffer who said that the Divine does not live in the sky but at “the center of the village” (McFague 2001: 137). Religious movements such as Mahatma Gandhi’s *satyagraha* movement, and Thailand’s *santi withee* (way of peace) are poignant examples on how religious principles can vehicle ecological concerns.

Thirdly, religious institutions can be at the forefront in espousing “planetary citizenship” via ecumenism. Religious ecumenism has in the last two decades developed in many countries as a way of challenging fundamentalism and intolerance. Religious ecumenism communicates a message of the unity of humanity and its “mutual solidarity” (Laszlo 2001:161).

Fourthly, the present age is characterised by sophisticated global communication networks which the social scientist Arjun Apparudai (1991, 1993), refers to as global ‘scapes’ which connect the planet. These scapes have not only expedited globalisation but also enable for the emergence of creative ideas. For example, “ideo-scapes” have spread environmental issues to the masses leading to the formation of many environmental organisations and lobby groups. The emergence of a new consciousness which Laszlo envisages embraces global communication technologies. Techno-scapes have promulgated new technologies in the

form of alternative fuel technologies such as solar, electric, wind, thermal, and hydrogen energies. Religio-scapes via ecumenism transmit the unity of religions and a rapprochement between religion and science. The marriage between religion and science will be one of the great developments in the 21st century. Religion will offer science an ethical and spiritual dimension into scientific discovery while science will provide religion with new ways of understanding the universe. Such a union will be necessary in order to confront the mounting challenges of environmental degradation and its social and planetary implications.

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