

Complicity and Conversion
Bad Practices Hidden or Justified by Ideology
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Introduction

I am to speak on “Bad Practices Hidden or Justified by Ideology,” the excuses that monks (male and female) use to justify behaviors that are environmentally irresponsible or unsustainable. I can do so only as a Benedictine who has passing acquaintance with Cistercian monasteries and almost no personal involvement with Buddhist monasticism.

As we undertake an exploration of the ecological shadow cast by our lives and the dark places of our hearts from which so that shadow emerges, we can recall Indra’s net. If each of us is a crystal pearl that reflects all else, then we reflect the environmental blindness and harmful activities of all. We are, in fact, not just affected or stamped by their actions; in many, if not most instances, we re complicit in them. We might just think about the food we serve—the little packets of jam, the bananas transported from far away, the plastic cups and plates. We might also think of our clothes that don’t seem to be quite what Benedict had in mind when he spoke of locally available, inexpensive garments that could be handed on to the poor.

In what follows I will use “we” to refer to those of us who feel complicit in the environmental sins of our society. Perhaps you won’t feel you are part of that “we,” but if you do, I think “we” can come in the end to a confession or at least a lament of how much we need to change if we are to be at home with all that is in God’s beautiful world, and how much we probably cannot change and so how unfree and complicit we remain.

The topic is not a cheerful one, but we can start on a cheerful note. Monastics have many deep affinities with environmental stewardship. Our theory and practice commit us to dispossession and self-discipline—to asceticism. Our profession is designed to nurture virtue, reverence and care—ethics. Our way of life is ordered toward an abiding sense of the divine presence and at-one-ment with the divine—mysticism. And so the purposes and practices of our way of life provide a threefold impetus toward environmental living: ascetical, ethical and mystical.[1] Or, better, our asceticism, ethics and mystical awareness are three ways in which we become free in and for God, each other and the world. Or again, they are three ways in which we are attuned to reality.

By this threefold practice we are formed to do a threefold service of sacramental worship, compassionate service and witness. Our lifestyle (*conversatio*) should attune us to the sacramental depth of the physical world and so fit us for liturgy. The simplicity and disciplines of our life enable us to serve the needs of others. The presence of communities can witness to the primacy of God, the mystery of every creature, the beauty deep down things. So what keeps us from being more environmentally responsible, from being better witnesses.

Theological Justifications

It is possible to find peculiar theological justifications for not caring more wholeheartedly for the earth. None of them seems to be exclusively monastic, though I have known at least one monk who has voiced each of them. One is that the world is going to end anyway; in fact, we seem to be on the brink of destroying it. So why worry about the Lahontan trout, the level of mercury in the reservoir, or the trash in our dumpster? We are all going to die anyway, and the whole biosphere is going to die as well.

A second ideological trap is the domination model. There is a crass version: the world is ours to dominate, so we can do with it what we want. A more subtle form: we are the summit of creation and if it is a choice between “them” and us, “they” have to go. If cougars occasionally kill human beings, cougars must be exterminated. Both domination models assume that the world was made exclusively for humankind. But perhaps it has other purposes independent of our own.

A third ideological tool is moderation, the middle way. In her commentary on the Rule of Benedict, St. Hildegard emphasizes that Benedict set the bar neither too high nor too low. In English, my metaphor is ambiguous; it could be the bar on a high jump or the bar with stools in a tavern. Hildegard’s illustration is equally ambiguous. She says that St. Benedict put the spigot in the barrel neither too high nor too low—which suggests moderate height, but would also make it easier to overindulge.

A fourth ideological illusion is that notion that because we are “contemplatives” we ought not to concern ourselves with the material world. This is closely connected with another bit of bad theology: contempt for the world (*contemptus mundi*), a phrase that occurs very frequently in medieval monastic authors. It is bad theology if it is interpreted to mean contempt for material things or shunning of created beauty and pleasure or even of creation as such. Or it could mean contempt for the greed that earthly things arouse in us.

Culturally Derived Justifications

So much for the theological justifications for our environmental irresponsibility. There are some other ideological traps into which we fall not through skewed theology, but through the impact of our culture. These are subtle and pervasive. If one takes *contemptus mundi* to mean disdain for the seductions of desire occasioned by the culture around us, perhaps we could use a bit more of it. Ours is a culture based on the seduction of marketing and advertising. Recall the study about which we heard earlier: the average boy spends eighteen seconds of “quality time” with his father each day. That same boy spends four or five hours plugged into electronic media, and many other hours in the company of peers who are saturated with the “affluenza” virus. If his family are practicing Catholics he spends one hour a week in church and maybe another in religious education class. Christian monasteries exist for those who want to spend hours a day with their heavenly Father and their lives with others who share Christ’s teaching. The consumerist bacillus reaches us nonetheless. We cannot avoid exposure, but we can inoculate ourselves by immersing ourselves in the worldview held by our cognitive minority and recognizing the difference between our worldview and the worldview of the consumer culture.

A second cultural trap is mistaking good intentions for actual internal and external change. Many denizens of Western places like Sun Valley and Aspen are green: they go to environmental lectures, contribute to the Nature Conservancy, buy organic eggs and milk, and drive a Prius. They oppose light and noise pollution in their communities—and go to sleep with a sense of environmental righteousness in their McMansions that leave an environmental footprint the size of an aircraft carrier. We monks need to do what we say.

A third cultural trap is pragmatism. Male monastics are sometimes a bit defensive about being practical. Often their experience of the world is somewhat limited, or if they entered the monastery later in life, they regard their fellow monks who entered the community at an early age as impractical. In either case, they are liable to reject proposals to adopt more environmentally friendly practices as impractical, chimeras dreamt up by people who are out of touch with the real world or—in Idaho parlance—seduced by New England liberals. One form of this pragmatism is the sort of stewardship that argues that people have given us money or we have earned it, and we need to be good stewards of that money, which means we invest or spend it most economically—without reference to externalities. Then we can't afford to put in solar hearing, because it won't pay for itself in less than nineteen years.

Defense Mechanisms

Thus far we have spoken of theological and cultural illusions that can justify bad practices. I think that to these we might—with apologies to Anna Freud—add a third category of psychological ploys. These are ways we cope with horrific or inconvenient truths. They help us live the contradictions between our convictions and claims and the compromises and complicities to which we are party. Denial is one. A woman, whose husband works for the dairy industry, told me that science is inconclusive about the effects of bovine growth hormones and the regular use of low-level doses of antibiotics in industrial dairies. We can say to ourselves: anthropogenic global warming has not been proven. Or we can fail to face the fact that we are not doing more in defense of the environment because we are afraid to alienate our supporters and constituents.

A second defense mechanism is repression, by which we bury our awareness of our responsibilities for the impacts of our actions and lifestyle.

A third mechanism is projection: China is producing x-million tons of greenhouse gasses per year, so what difference does it make if we run our two-stroke lawnmowers or drive to the post office instead of riding a bike there?

Conclusion

During this conference we have discussed how theology and monastic tradition and experience can alleviate the ecological crisis in which we find ourselves. It has been my sad task to ponder ways in which we monks can avoid letting the ecological crisis cast light on our monastic lifestyles and call us to a deeper embrace of the ethical, ascetical and mystical fabric of our lives in which we seek at-one-ment and attunement with God, each other and God's world which we

share.

Let me end by pushing back beyond false ideologies and doctrines to two primordial ways of being in the world, which illustrate the stark options which face humanity and highlight the contribution we can make to meeting the environmental challenge.

The world is will. But not divine or human will; it is not something with an intention, a direction, an aim or a plan. It is just a blind, aimless, purposeless, all-powerful force on which everything depends but which itself depends on nothing or no one. . . . Thus the whole world of phenomena is a constant, endless struggle of all against all, as each battles to survive at the cost of the rest of the world. . . .[2]

That is the way a contemporary philosopher sums up the thought of Schopenhauer. If one splices in a “selfish gene” it seems to be the way many evolutionary biologists (not to mention MBAs) think the world works. Such a picture offers no reason except self-interest to care about the effects of our actions on the world or much hope that we can make a difference. And self-interest is what precipitated us into our current situation; it is unlikely to save us.

By contrast, here is an excerpt from a poem by Margaret Avison:

Every living thing
as a mass or a
morsel or one who moves with
the speed of light—
each in His miracle of particularity
the Lord knows.[3]

What science and our religious traditions tell us is that everything in its God-given particularity is interconnected with everything else. We seek at-one-ment or enlightenment as part of a whole to which and for which we are responsible. For the health and protection of that whole and each thing with it, we monks can contribute vision, motivation and practices that are at once ethical, ascetical and mystical. If we turn toward the earth with reverence and care, we can be confident that we will find its Ground and Goal. I'm not sure we can do that if we don't confess and lament our complicity in the illusions that have brought us to the current crisis.

[1]I owe this threefold distinction to an article by Elizabeth Johnson.

[2]Leszek Kolakowski, *Why Is There Something Rather than Nothing? 23 Questions from Great Philosophers* (New York: Basic Books, 2007) 175-177.

[3] Margaret Avison, “Exposure,” cited by D. S. Martin in a review of her collection, *Momentary Dark* (McClelland & Stewart, 2006) in *Image*, #51 (Fall 2006) 120.