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RELIGIOUS FAITH IN PURSUIT OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Introduction

In recent years, the world's religions, including the Abrahamic faiths as well as Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and various indigenous forms of spirituality, have been increasingly turning their ethical gaze toward the intersection of social, economic and ecological justice issues. This gives me hope because I believe many environmental injustices persist because the values of the neoliberal capitalist ethos have become so ingrained in our global social systems over the course of the past few generations that for most people today, it is the values of this economic paradigm, rather than the values of their faith traditions, that are predominant in governing their social lives and molding their daily lifestyles.[1] The neoclassical paradigm of economics that now dominates global society in its neoliberal manifestation ultimately aims for perpetual profit via perpetual financial growth and material expansion and functions according to a utilitarian mindset that seeks to commodify both an array of living beings as well as all forms of creative human activity in the process.[2] It posits a view of the human person as an intrinsically self-interested and rationalistic individual seeking to maximize her own benefits and satiate her own desires, at almost any cost.[3] As such, this dominant socio-economic paradigm envisions the natural world as being replete with

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[1] Sallie McFague. Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril. (Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress Press, 2001), 84.
Philip Cafaro. 2011. Taming Growth and Articulating a Sustainable Future: The Way Forward for Environmental Ethics. Ethics & the Environment, 16(1): 10.

[2] Herman Daly & John Cobb Jr. For the Common Good: redirecting the economy toward community, the environment and a sustainable future. Second Edition (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), 87.
Herman Daly, "Economics for a Full World," Great Transition Initiative (June 2015).

[3] Herman Daly & John Cobb Jr. For the Common Good: redirecting the economy toward community, the environment and a sustainable future. Second Edition (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), 159.
Sallie McFague. Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril. (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, Minn: 2001), 81.
Sallie McFague. A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming. (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, Minn: 2008), 83.

interchangeable resources for consumption and manipulation with the ultimate goal of social life as the competitive maximization and accrual of individual capital and wealth, which is to be used for the satiation of unmitigated desire. These elements of the neoclassical/neoliberal paradigm of socio-economic thought stand in stark contradiction to the relational view of personhood, the view of the natural world as kindred being, and communal life as striving for excellence in a state of mutual well-being that are to be found within most of the world's religious traditions. Many of the world's faiths denounce the vices of gluttony and greed that drive this socio-economic system and uphold the view that persons flourish when they live in community with other persons, and when we hold a proper degree of respect, if not reverence, for the natural world.

Toward an Interfaith Integral Ecology

Despite the fact that some environmentalists, following Lynn White's "*The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,*"[4] have accused the Judeo-Christian tradition for promoting the exploitative domination of nature, many Christian eco-theologians have noted that the term "dominion,"[5] found in Jewish and Christian scriptures, is more accurately translated as "stewardship" and have argued that care for the poor and for the earth are interrelated insofar as an attitude of domination underpins exploitation and mistreatment of humans, animals and ecosystems alike.[6] While this was a perspective that may have been considered marginal in decades past, such views are no longer to be found within the periphery of Christian thinking, as they have been espoused by Christianity's most senior hierarchs. For example, the concept of "environmental sin," first expressed in 1997[7] by Patriarch Bartholomew I of the Orthodox Christian tradition, was more recently adopted by Pope Francis in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si',*[8] where he promotes an *integral ecology* in which the social, economic, cultural and ecological dimensions of reality are understood holistically as inter-related aspects of

[4] White, Lynn. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." Science 155.3767 (1967): 1203-207.
[5] The term *"radah"* in Hebrew.
[6] Boff, Leonardo. Liberation Theology & Ecology in: Ecology & Poverty: Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995).
[7] Address of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the Environmental Symposium, Saint Barbara Greek Orthodox Church, Santa Barbara, California. November 8, 1997.
[8] Encyclical Letter Laudato Si' Of The Holy Father Francis On Care For Our Common Home (official English-language text of encyclical)". June 2015.

life on planet earth. In *Laudato Si'*, and in his 2023 companion encyclical: *Laudate Deum*,[9] Pope Francis criticizes the individualism, consumerism, and perpetual growth economics that he correctly views as driving the ecological catastrophes currently taking place, and which are predominantly affecting the poorest people and poorest nations most dramatically.[10] So how should we reform and redesign our economy?

Prohibiting the Sin of Usury

To begin, we must grapple with the fact that the global economy pursues infinite growth on a finite planet and is intimately intertwined with financial systems that rely upon interest to fuel this exponential process of economic growth. However, Judaism, Christianity and Islam have all traditionally been critical of the practice of charging interest, with both Christian and Islamic civilizations having historically even gone so far as to legally prohibit usury — or charging interest on monies loaned — in one form or another. Up until recently, laws regulating interest on loans, sometimes referred to as "usury bans," were commonplace even within the secular legal paradigms of many States in the U. S.; with most usury laws unfortunately being overturned at the behest of credit card companies during the mid to late twentieth century. Sadly, the majority of Christians are not even aware that their faith tradition has historically condemned this practice since most denominations no longer hold this view; for instance, the Catholic Church overturned its prohibition on usury during the nineteenth century as a means of accommodating the industrial capitalist paradigm that had come to dominate social life. While many Muslims are also accommodating of the practice of usury, it is still considered to be a sin in Islam and therefore some Muslims still engage in an Islamic form of banking in which *riba* (interest) is still deemed *haram*(prohibited), and hence, do not practice usury.[11]

Given the fact that our ecological crisis is so deeply wedded to the infinite growth model of economic 'development' in which interest plays a crucial role, especially in the financial sector, as the world's largest religious tradition, Christianity might re-

[9] Encyclical Letter Laudate Deum Of The Holy Father Francis On Care For Our Common Home (official English-language text of encyclical)". October 2023.
[10] In a sad irony, these people and nations tend to be those who have contributed the least to either causing or exacerbating the ecological crises currently unfolding.
[11] Imran Ahsan Khan Nyazee. The Concept of Riba' and Islamic Banking. (Malaysia: The Other Press: 2016)

consider its modern acceptance of usury and once again begin to take the sin of usury seriously. Christian organizations may consider developing alternate forms of banking, as some Muslims have done, and may even be able to forge interfaith economic collaborations and banking partnerships with Muslims as they mutually adopt the dual cause of combatting socio-economic inequities while enacting more ecologically sustainable modes of economic behavior. While on its own this will certainly not solve the aforementioned problems, it may however, help create global networks of anti-usury banking systems that could potentially serve as a solid foundation upon which to build an alternate global socio-economic system. One that it is not tied to the goal of perpetual growth and which may uphold an ideal of the common good shared amongst many of the world's faiths.

Work as Serving the Common Good

In the 1970s, the Buddhist economist E.F. Schumacher had argued that a good economy ought to be designed in such a way as to provide all members of society with a sufficient degree of well-being and livelihoods that do not cause harm to others, and which promote service to the public good of the communities in which they live. Schumacher's Buddhist economics shares much in common with Catholic Social Teaching and many of the ideas he espoused foreshadow those expressed by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*. For instance, Schumacher argued that work should not be conceived of solely as a means to acquire wealth but should also serve the common good, promote communal solidarity and help cultivate virtue, as he critiqued excessive consumerism, promoted moderate consumption practices, argued for sustainably produced and locally sourced products and endorsed renewable forms of energy.[12]

Performing certain types of work, or engaging in certain types of professions, can be inherently antithetical to the Buddhist conception of the ethical life, which is primarily informed by the notions of *karuna* (compassion for all beings), *ahimsa* (avoid causing harm to sentient life), and *nirodha*, or the idea that we must attempt to overcome our materialistic desires if we are to free ourselves and others from anguish and suffering; which are all part and parcel of striving to attain the ultimate goal of *nirvana*, or liberation from suffering, especially as conceived in

[12] E. F. Schumacher. Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics As If People Mattered. (London, U.K.: Blond & Briggs 1973)

the Mahayana tradition. Without going into too much detail, one of the principles of the eight-fold path that is to govern and guide a Buddhist's life is "right livelihood." Consequently, to hold professions that intentionally aim to manufacture desire for unnecessary items for the sole aim of creating profit while intentionally neglecting the harms that certain products and modes of production may cause to ecological and human health and well-being, would be to fail to maintain the principle of "right livelihood," and thereby would divert one from the path toward *nirvana*.

Expressing views that I believe resonate well with the Buddhist concept of *right livelihood*, Basil the Great of Caesarea (a saint recognized and revered by the Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican branches of Christianity) wrote, "we should serve through our skill those who seek to satisfy their real needs," believing that the "aim is simplicity and frugality" and argued that "we must avoid pandering to the foolish and harmful desires of men by working for the ends sought after by them".[13] In other words, Basil is saying that through our work we should not be attempting to satiate people's unreasonable desires nor seek to supply them with the objects of their impetuous wants. Instead, through our work we ought to seek to provide them with the highest quality of goods and services that genuinely satisfy their needs and contribute to their wellbeing. Basil endorses livelihoods capable of earning a sufficient amount of profit while simultaneously contributing to the common good of society and the welfare of the local community in which one lives; a view which foreshadows the ideas of Schumacher and Francis. Living in the fourth century, St. Basil is best remembered for pursuing a life committed to the ideal of *philanthropia*, or love of humanity, grounded in active service and for establishing the world's first hospitals, hospices, orphanages, soup-kitchens and old-age homes in complexes he called "the New City" that eventually became know as "Basileads."[14] As a bishop who engaged in the socio-political world of his day, and as an abbot of monks who was responsible for the creation of a communal and socially transformative model of monastic-lay cooperation, Basil is one of the best historical models we have for understanding how religious communities can create alternate cooperative socio-

[13] Basil. The Long Rules. The Ascetical Works. The Fathers of the Church. M. Monica Wagner, C.S.C., Trans. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1950), 311.
[14] Paul Schroeder. On Social Justice. United States: St. Basil the Great. (New York, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009).

economic systems in pursuit of economic and ecological justice.

With the sole goal of perpetual growth in profits at the expense of all other values, our current neoliberal/neoclassical economic system is designed to achieve precisely the opposite of the type of society Basil developed and is grounded upon principles that are diametrically at odds with either Schumacher's or Francis' visions of the good society. With its dual obsession with novelty and profit, the current neoliberal economy pressures companies to produce inexpensive disposable products that are intentionally designed to fail in order to create a fabricated 'need' for individuals to replace them in a strategy known as "planned obsolescence" for products that are often not even remotely required for human flourishing and which may even be harmful to us or negatively impact our overall wellbeing. Smartphones and computers, for example, are designed in such a manner that 'consumers' are forced to dispose of, or 'upgrade,' their 'outdated' models in order to continue to use the electronic devices that are demanded of them in the modern workplace. Aside from the non-durability of electronic products, everything from the industrial garment industry to the automotive industry has come to employ the rationale of "planned obsolescence" as a means of creating a need where one did not previously exist. While this applies to items that have become requirements for social functionality in the modern world, most of the products produced and sold satisfy no actual biological or psychological human need nor are they actually required for social functionality, even in the modern world. We must pursue work that contributes to our earthly flourishing and find ways to resist the insidious global encroachment of neoliberalism. But, how?

Re-localizing our Global Economy

Both secular and religious environmentalists have called attention to the need for global society to reform our unjust global (neoliberal) economic system, with many arguing for forms of localism as a solution. They do so because in addition to ecological and health benefits, enacting forms of economic localism may also help empower regional communities by fostering local entrepreneurial endeavors as well as collaborations amongst local businesses, which would help prevent the extraction of wealth from smaller locales by transnational corporate conglomerates and contribute to the local retention of wealth creation. While these ideas have been

promoted by ecological economists and social justice advocates, they may also find support in traditional religious principles and practices as well.

One example is the principle of subsidiarity found within Catholic Social Teaching (CST), which maintains that local communities ought to be afforded the power and authority to manage their own affairs when they are capable of doing so, rather than have a centralized governing body attempt to manage the affairs of distant regions. Subsidiarity entails the empowerment of local communities because it upholds a social vision in which society is comprised of smaller local and regional communities, which are in turn comprised of even smaller units, until we reach the level of the family, which is the foundation of society in CST. If implemented in the context of ecological justice, the principle of subsidiarity could be used to support local family and cooperatively owned businesses, especially small-scale sustainable farms, and empower local farming cooperatives as well as farmers' markets and other such organizations that enable small local producers to bring their goods to market.

This is of utmost importance because the industrialization of agriculture is one of the primary contributors to the ecological crises we face. By using energy intensive machinery industrial agriculture is one of the largest producers of carbon emissions, far exceeding even automotive emissions. Further, with its reliance on a monocultural paradigm of cultivation, industrial agriculture is deteriorating soil quality due to its lack of crop diversity, which helps keep soils fertile. As a result, this monocultural paradigm requires the constant use of chemical fertilizers that not only pollute groundwater but which are also polluting the bodies of the humans that consume food items produced with the use of these toxic chemicals. Additionally, industrial agriculture is also contributing to deforestation, due to the rampant destruction of forestlands so that they may be converted into farmlands, as well as water-waste, as a result of turning deserts into farmlands and the high levels of freshwater required for food production. This is a shame because, agriculture was a profession that Saint Basil believed was the noblest of all because it provides the necessities of life.[15] Unfortunately, like almost every other form of livelihood in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, agriculture has succumb to the pressures of the neoclassical

[15] Basil. The Long Rules. The Ascetical Works. The Fathers of the Church. M. Monica Wagner, C.S.C., Trans.(Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1950), 312.

economic system's demands for overspecialization and perpetual growth that has transformed farming from a life-sustaining practice that helped contribute to local prosperity and empowerment into the food production arm of the global capitalist system. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of meat production. Corporate food production conglomerates are constantly creating Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), colloquially referred to as "factory farms," in order to produce enough meat, often beef, to meet rising global demands as a result of the proliferation of the "western," or "American," diet and excessive consumerist lifestyle. The global proliferation of CAFOs and monocultural industrial farming, that goes hand in hand with the heightened demand for unsustainably produced animal products, is in direct opposition to the virtues and values of moderation, prudence, temperance, and respect for nature that the world's faith traditions hold out to us as ideals of excellence.

One source of insight into how the agricultural industry can be transformed via sociopolitical action may be found within Islamic ideas pertaining to the distribution of *zakat*, or charitable taxation, and would involve targeting the ways in which our taxes are redistributed in society. Like the Roman Catholic idea of subsidiarity, Islamic principles governing the distribution of *zakat* also endorse a form of localism, insofar as it is taught that such monies ought to remain within the local communities from which they are taken as a means of increasing local solidarity and preventing exploitative extraction of wealth from a local community. The idea here is that when *zakat* monies were not used locally, transparency and accountability diminished and hence, the chances for corruption increased. This is currently the case with government subsidies for corporately owned industrial methods of farming that not only harm the earth but which also oppress laborers[16] as they extract resources[17] from local communities. The same type of monies that CAFOs and other corporately owned farms receive as government subsidies are not available to small-scale farms, and are especially not offered for ecologically sustainable farming practices such as regenerative agriculture, permaculture or agroforestry. Implementing the logic involved in the distribution of *zakat* to farming in the United States, for example, could be used to

[16] Who are often underpaid undocumented migrants forced to live in overcrowded and often unsanitary living conditions.
[17] Such as fresh water sources — be it streams, rivers or groundwater — to irrigate crops.

support reforming what gets included into congressional Farm Bills as well as for endorsing the enactment of State-level subsidies for local small-scale farming operations engaged in sustainable agricultural methods and fair labor practices.

Conclusion

If we continue to allow it to self-perpetuate, the global neoliberal system will be our demise because it fails to realize how intimately connected the well-being of our natural world is with our own and misunderstands what it means for our species to flourish together with other living beings as an earthly community. Ultimately, there is much ethical wisdom that global civilization can learn from the world's religions in regard to how we can transform our global neoliberal system and begin to adopt alternative socio-economic systems that promote rather than stifle environmental justice. Therefore, what is required is an active reevaluation of our values that leads to a transfiguration of our consumption and production practices, forms of work and modes of living so that we can come to collectively embody resistance to the neoliberal order.