

Eco-Justice and US Foreign Policy

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I have been thinking a lot lately about the difference between an anti-war movement and the peace movement. As I see it, an anti-war movement is one end of a continuum of concern and action, with a fully realized peace movement at the other end. This continuum is neatly summed up in the words of Pope Paul VI: "If you want peace, work for justice."

This recognition that the causes of war are usually found in some degree of economic and/or social injustice, moves us from solely a stance of opposition to war toward the work of building a society more equitable and kind. As some have said, it is not enough to say "no," we must be able to also say "yes".

Thinking this way we begin to see the peace movement in familiar settings which we usually do not associate with peace, let alone a movement. We see it in a family where the parents are loving and attentive to their children, in schools where teaching opens children not only to the "outer world" of math, history and science, but also to their "inner world" where wonder, dreams, hope and imagination reside. We begin to see the peace movement in the work for affordable housing, for a livable wage, for a method of food production which works with the natural cycles of nature; we begin to see the work of community building as peace building, making our communities more inclusive as we listen to one another's stories and share our experiences; we begin to see the peace movement in the work for a transparent and fair criminal justice system; in the struggle for an international system of fair trade, we begin to see our own efforts to be a good neighbor and friend, to contribute to our community as an integral part of the movement toward a just and peaceful world and, to get to my thesis, we come to recognize the peace movement includes the

efforts to restore the natural world, to preserve the earth's environment and to secure a sustainable future.

My thesis is this: U.S. foreign policy is antithetical to the preservation of the natural world which is an ethical and moral issue requiring social and economic justice. Present U. S. policy works against such justice as it seeks to maintain the privileged position of those dominating economic and political life in the United States and its client countries, to the detriment of the majority of humanity and the earth's ecological integrity.

Seeing the peace movement as the common activities of nurturance, as building justice and sustainability we begin to connect the dots between what at first appear to be separate "issues." This is what I am attempting today, to connect environmental ethics to U.S. foreign policy. Of course in the time I have today I can only point to the tips of some of the many icebergs floating about us. I see this effort more as an exploration than an analysis or a description.

The connection I use between foreign policy and a sustainable future is the concept of ecological justice, or eco-justice.

Dieter Hessel, a social ethicist, is a member of the Center of Theological Inquiry, Director of the Ecumenical Program on Ecology, Justice and Faith, and co-Director of Theological Education to Meet the Environmental Challenge. Dr. Hessel describes

four basic norms of eco-justice ethics [which] include: 1) solidarity with other people and creatures in the earth community reflecting a deep respect for creation; 2) ecological sustainability – environmentally fitting

habits of living and working that enable life to flourish and utilizes ecologically and socially appropriate technology; 3) sufficiency as a standard of organized sharing, requiring basic floors and definite ceilings for equitable or “fair” consumption; and 4) socially-just participation in decisions about how to obtain sustenance and to manage community life for the good of the commons.

Dr. Hessel says that “the third and fourth norms express the requirements of distributive and participatory justice in a world that has reached or is exceeding resource production, pollution, and population limits.” He adds “the agenda of Christian eco-theology and ethics intersects, rather than competes, with human rights struggles for racial, gender, and economic justice.”

With this understanding we begin to see that not only is the environmental question one of ethics and values, it is a question of politics understood as the use of power to achieve objectives and goals.

Here we come to the issue of how our government uses the extraordinary power of this nation in the pursuit of its objectives and goals in the name of our “national interests.”

One document “The National Security Strategy of the United States” released by the Bush Administration in Sept. 2002 provides an insight into the foreign policy, and the definition of “national interests” of the present administration.

I must mention that while the current NSS is the product of the present administration, it is merely the most explicit policy statement of the US government about its foreign policy goals over the last 60 years, under both Democratic and Republican administrations.

The NSS of the United States is an outline for the continued domination of the international community by the United States. In the words of VP Dick Cheney, “[T]he arrangement [for] the twenty-first century is most assuredly being shaped right now”, that “the United States will continue to be the dominant political, economic and military power in the world.” Vice President Dick Cheney, quoted in *The New Yorker*, May 7, 2001

We who work for a sustainable, peaceful future must question and challenge the notion of “dominance” of one nation above all others. If, as Dr. Hessel maintains, “sufficiency as a standard of organized sharing, and socially-just participation in decisions...” is the way toward economic and social justice as the requisites for sustainability, then any doctrine of dominance must be viewed as suspect and ultimately undermining the possibility of a just and sustainable future. We must keep in the front of our awareness the foundation of justice and sustainability, that every person has intrinsic worth and value; that this earth is for all of humanity as it is for all life.

We must see that doctrines of dominance are antithetical to a sustainable future as it precludes the equal participation of all people in the decisions about how we are to live in justice on a finite planet. Yet dominance is the central principle of the foreign policy of the United States. The NSS describes US policy as maintaining present military superiority into the distant future by not allowing any nation, foe or friend, to achieve parity. Nations which appear to pose a present or FUTURE threat may, according to the NSS, be preemptively attacked. Some analysts believe that the attack on Iraq was intended to serve notice to every nation that the US meant exactly what it said.

I believe for both moral and strategic reasons we must not demonize the people who formulate US policies. We must instead work from the belief that they, after looking at the

present world situation and human history, honestly conclude that the way to the future depends on the United States dominating the rest of the world. I admit that this is a hard stance to maintain as we see the Bush Administration acting on its shared vision of the future, one which includes military might as a central principle of US involvement with the world. We must not be naïve and forget that power corrupts and finds its own justifications.

As I see it, this policy of military and economic dominance comes from the world view of those having economic and political power who, consciously or unconsciously, define the present situation in terms which benefit them. While we refuse to demonize them we must, with all we have at our disposal, resist them. We must believe that they are still susceptible to truth and the power of love. When this becomes our operating principle we are working within the peace movement.

The NSS of the presidency of George Bush is couched in terms and phrases which, if taken at face value sound almost benevolent. But reading between the lines and examining the actions of this administration we can only conclude that the goal of US foreign policy is to use military and economic power to impose on the rest of the world without their participation a future where the many serve the few.

This strategy includes trade policies and military intervention which maintains US economic and political dominance of the world community. The result is a growing disparity in the distribution of wealth and political power. Economic and political elites in the US and client nations get richer while the majority population sinks into economic marginalization and desperate poverty.

When we hear of global warming, the depletion of the forests, unsustainable agricultural practices including the mining of

soil and water resources, we need to look at injustice as the fundamental cause. We need to realize that if someone else owns your resources and protects their ownership either through trade treaties imposed by the powerful or thorough military intervention, that poverty and environmental degradation will result. We need to understand that people in such a situation will try to survive by whatever means at their disposal, even if it means killing the last tiger or rhinoceros or burning down the remaining rain forest; they will not forever sit by and watch their children die from starvation and diseases which stalk the poor.

When national policies are promulgated on the assumption that some people are more worthy than others, that "our interests" always trump "your" interests, and when overwhelming military and economic power serves to keep that notion in place, we end up with a world as we have it: growing poverty and desperation, and ecological degradation which threatens the very existence of life on this fragile blue planet.

Our way out of this dilemma is ultimately ethical in nature, which includes the recognition that all life has a claim to this earth. It is also political, that the power to define the future must reside in everyone who will live in that world, not just those who have the military and economic power to impose their will. It means strengthening international law and institutions where all nations have an equal voice in addressing world wide problems and in shaping the future.

It is time for those of us for whom ethics and morality are defining aspects of our humanity to stand up, organize and confront the prevailing power structures driving our earth toward death and the extinction of the hope of human fulfillment. This is the challenge before us.