

CATHOLIC THEOLOGY & GLOBAL WARMING

- Topic: Prophets of Ecological Responsibility Inspired by Teilhard, Lonergan, and Berry
- Convener: Jame Schaefer, Marquette University
- Moderator: Annemarie Kidder, Ecumenical Theological Seminary
- Presenters: Richard Kropf, Diocese of Lansing
Richard Liddy, Seton Hall University
Peter Ellard, Siena College

In “Teilhard and the Limits to Growth: The Evolutionary Dynamic toward ‘Ultra-Humanity,’” Kropf presented in three parts his inspiration for addressing human-forced climate changes from Teilhard de Chardin’s (1881-1955) reflections. The first focused on Teilhard’s explanation of the dynamics of evolutionary progression following the “law of complexity consciousness,” the “compressive convergence” of a rapidly expanding human population that has precipitated new social, political and resource problems, and the concomitant emergence of an “Ultra-Humanity” through which these problems can be resolved. Informed by the *Limits to Growth* studies published in 1972 with successive updates in 1992 and 2004 and by data from the United Nations, Kropf subsequently examined the phenomenon of “overshoot” and the consequent drain on the world’s resources, changes in the global climate and other factors that are exacerbating the adverse effects on Earth, and the challenge of achieving its sustainability. He returned in the third part of his presentation to a more detailed understanding of the concept of “ultra humanity” which he described as a collaboration of human endeavors required to save our planet for habitation by future generations. Achieving “ultra humanity” is a choice that we must make now to avoid the destruction of Earth.

Liddy found Bernard Lonergan (1904-1984) particularly helpful when contemplating human-forced climate change. In a way unique among twentieth-century theologians, Lonergan embraced scientific consciousness as the way of taking possession of one’s own mind through a process of “intellectual conversion” that opens to a world-view of “emergent probability” and the emergence of “schemes of recurrence” according to schedules of probabilities. For Lonergan, taking possession of one’s own mind would be the key to working through the disputed issues involved in climate change. Among these issues are: (1) How to assess differences among scientists and determine who we should believe; (2) the role of belief in science; (3) how to reach sufficiently grounded judgments about these issues in the midst of the nay-sayers and deniers of anthropogenic climate change; (4) the degree of probability that is needed to support concrete communal policies and actions; (5) the relevance of the Gospel call to conversion for addressing changes in the global climate that humans are causing, the biases against conversion, and the willingness to change our minds, practices, and lifestyles at individual and societal levels of functioning; and, (6) the nature of Christian humanism during this time in which human-forced changes in the climate are disputed

yet action is needed to mobilize many for the common good. Liddy noted that Lonergan pointed to Teilhard as incarnating the kind of humanism that is needed today.

In “Thomas Berry as the Groundwork for a Dark Green Catholic Theology,” Ellard acknowledged that Catholic theologians and the magisterium have attempted to green traditional theology, but the climate crisis requires going deeper and darker. Berry provides the groundwork upon which to build a dark green Catholic theology, Ellard contended, as he outlined key aspects of Berry’s thought and demonstrated how they serve as the basis for a broad reconstruction of human consciousness and Catholic theology. This theological undertaking requires us to recognize the magnitude of the climate crisis and the need for all endeavors to be grounded in contemporary science, specifically the “new story” of cosmic evolutionary history. From a theological perspective, the universe must be seen as a manifestation of the divine, humans must be understood as the universe conscious of itself, and our theology must be geared toward deep intimacy and communion with Earth. The development of a deep, dark green Catholic theology requires following Berry’s urging to ‘put on the shelf’ some parts of the tradition that are not helpful at the present time and to revisit them in ways that convey the communal nature of our existence with other entities in constituting the universe.

A lively discussion followed. After expressing grave concern about the oil gushing from the failed deep well in the Gulf of Mexico, participants stressed the need to engage helpful aspects of the Catholic theological tradition for addressing the less visible climate crisis while downplaying aspects that are not helpful—especially those that tend to be reductionistically anthropocentric. Remaining alert to scientific and other sources of knowledge was determined essential to constructively resolve climate and other environmental crises. Maintaining a sense of urgency was emphasized, and the advisability of using coercive measures to change patterns of use that yield excessive greenhouse gases was discussed, though the impossibility of coercing insight and conversion to transformed behavior was recognized.

The status of the Interest Group’s anthology of various theological approaches to addressing human-forced changes in the global climate was overviewed. Topics that should be covered but are not explicitly indicated among the enumerated essays were identified (e.g., the science of climate change) and slated for inclusion in the introduction. All essays are due by November 1 with publication anticipated by the end of 2011.

JAME SCHAEFER
Marquette University
Milwaukee, Wisconsin