

## EXCURSUS II

### Thomas Sieger Derr on Justice and Ecotheology at the National Council of Churches

Anyone who has followed the uncertain progress of the environmental movement in international circles such as the United Nations or the World Council of Churches knows that the poor of the earth tend to regard Western preoccupation with ecology as a device to keep them in their place by prohibiting their development. The environmental movement conflicts at important points with social justice. But, apparently, important people at the National Council of Churches have not been paying attention. A statement of focus for the next triennium (1976-79) adopted by the Governing Board calls for a new "sacramental, holistic view of the universe," where we will act so as to be "accountable [to] every one of God's creatures who share this planet." Of course, "such a perspective necessitates a change of heart and mind" from our current practice of simply *exploiting* nature for human benefit. The Governing Board is to implement this new perspective by setting broad goals and specific programs so as to be "whole and consonant with the sacramental-global-interdependent vision."

The statement pays tribute to Charles Birch, whose views clearly inspired it. Birch is an Australian biologist, an active participant in ecumenical conferences, and a passionate crusader for both the environmental movement and process theology. At the meeting of the Governing Board, Birch delivered again the speech he had given to the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Nairobi last year. It is a speech that rings all the familiar charges on impending ecological disaster, denouncing the technological society for pursuing temporary improvements in the human lot at the price of ultimate catastrophe. He concludes with "the most important thing I have to say," which is, predictably, a plea for process theology to lead us out of trouble.

Birch repeats what is by now a familiar litany: Western Christianity (and Western secularism too) have an instrumental view of nature that is "egoistic" and "arrogant." We need instead a "radical reinterpretation of the nature-man relationship," a new view that will regard the "intrinsic value of creatures in themselves," honoring nature's "subjectivity."

Both the National Council statement and Birch's speech do make perfunctory bows in the direction of social justice, using a particular phrase coined within the World Council of Churches to indicate the goal of policy: a "just and sustainable society." This phrase appeared only because Third World representatives resented intensely the introduction of ecological concerns into ecumenical social debates. After the Bucharest conference of 1974 on "Science

and Technology for Human Development," the working committee of the WCC's Church and Society department met to set future directions, just as the National Council's Governing Board has now done. The scientists, or many of them, wanted that goal to be "the sustainable society." Third World members—fearing, naturally, that "sustainable" meant limiting their own development and dooming them to perpetual poverty—fought for another goal, international social justice. The argument was heated and without resolution. Toward the end of the working committee's meeting, when it was clear that we were not going to get anywhere, I wrote "just and sustainable society" on a slip of paper and gave it to Paul Abrecht, Church and Society's executive secretary. My point was that we would have to find a way



to accommodate both of these interests. Soon the phrase began to appear in the department's literature, and it has gradually worked its way into general ecumenical discourse—and now, even into National Council of Churches statements.

The intention of that phrase is a determination that ecological attention *not* come at the cost of ignoring the concern for justice. Neither Birch nor the National Council statement have honored this intention with any seriousness. Both simply assume, virtually without argument, that justice will follow automatically when we stop looking at nature as a resource to satisfy human needs and start treating it as sacred, or subjective, or of intrinsic value. The National Council document offers no explanation whatever

for this highly debatable judgment. Birch slips it past by linking ecological degradation to abuse of the poor through a common *attitude*, the exploitive mentality. If we exploit nature, we exploit people more readily. The industrialist polluting, he says, is like a juvenile delinquent slashing railway coach seats. Animal liberation and plant liberation, he insists, are part of one movement, which includes people liberation. This disturbingly simplistic analysis is sealed with his abrupt dismissal of those who think ecology is a distraction from the concerns of the poor. Their argument is, he tells us, "cock-eyed." So much for that.

Neither Birch nor the National Council are unaware of the claims of the poor. But both make these claims subservient to environmental concerns. Both *claim*, or at least *hope*, that the needs of the poor may yet be served. Birch's program is de-development of the rich so that their wealth may be distributed to the poor. One may heartily agree with him that the current distribution of wealth and resource use is unjust. But it is politically naive to expect this problem to be corrected by denouncing technological development and pinning all our hopes on redistribution. There are plenty of brutal ecological realists writing today—Garrett Hardin, William Paddock, Paul Ehrlich, Jay Forrester, Jean Raspail—who tell us plainly enough what a program of strict ecological salvation means for the poor: We abandon them. Birch has a lot more arguing to do before he makes his case; and the National Council of Churches would be extraordinarily foolish, not to say wicked, to accept his position uncritically.

Finally, if this whole program is dependent on process theology, those who care about justice would do well to look to other theologies for sustenance. Actually Birch's theological plea, far from being "the most important thing [he] has to say," is incidental to his paper. It is at least arguable that a more traditional theology that emphasizes human responsibility for the rest of creation will serve the ecological cause as well, and that of justice better. Birch, in another of his unexamined contemptuous dismissals, writes off this "stewardship" concept as a "tamely interpreted rider" on the exploitive mentality. I would argue that a theology that treats nature as a resource to be used responsibly for human well-being is far more likely to serve justice than a theology that awards nature subjectivity and gives it intrinsic rights beyond the reach of any human beings, no matter how desperate their condition.

In any event, the National Council would do well to keep its mind open on the theological foundations for its next triennium. If the Council really intends to swallow the Birch position and impose this dubious new gospel on all its departments, those staffs and boards that are charged with implementing programs for social justice should consider the merits of insubordination for the sake of conscience.

*Thomas Sieger Derr, who teaches at Smith College, is author of Ecology and Human Need.*

## EXCURSUS III

### *Tenzin N. Tethong on Tibet: The Other Story*

Tibet for centuries captured the imagination of the world as a land of magic and mystery. Located high on a plateau, surrounded by mountains forming an awesome and impregnable natural barrier, Tibet kept to itself through the centuries. By the end of World War II it was finally poised to open its doors, as was most of the world then, ready to be swept along by global advancements in technology and human relations. But this was not to happen. A foreign army—China's—marched into Tibet, closing its borders once more. And this time the flow of people across the Himalayas reached what was probably its lowest ebb since the early records of Tibetan history.

Nine years later there was a massive exodus of nearly 100,000 people across Tibet's borders into India. This was surely the single largest movement of Tibetans in their entire history. It was the result of a courageous but hopeless uprising that attempted to shake off the alien occupant. The event was dramatic, and the world watched unbelievably as the Tibetans rallied to oppose an incredible war machine. The Tibetans stood alone to defend their integrity at all costs. But it proved futile. Those who could not conceive of a compromise with the military victors left their homes and their loved ones and fled into exile.

The Tibetans received worldwide attention, admiration, and sympathy when this happened in 1959, and the world pointed an accusing finger at China, condemning its acts as genocide. Unfortunately for the Tibetans, the international climate today has changed for the worse and China stands tall and respected. To tell the truth of the Tibetan story is an uphill battle, for every statement out of China is eagerly awaited, greeted as a gem of truth and wisdom.

Two well-known individuals from the West have visited Tibet recently: author Han Suyin and journalist Neville Maxwell. Both have spoken and written about the glorious achievements of the Chinese in Tibet—Suyin in a book published in France and Maxwell in a series that appeared in the *New York Times*, July 8-12. They have condemned virtually everything of the past and praised every material and visual change they were shown. It should be pointed out that there are those among the Tibetans and in the international academic community who, with more specific and sounder knowledge, can write equally glowing articles that speak favorably of Tibet's past and certainly with greater objectivity of Tibet's present.