REFLECTIONS ON THE RENE DUBOS FORUM, SEPTEMBER 23-25, 1979:

ON THE COEXISTENCE OF RURAL AND URBAN AREAS

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It is not easy to evaluate such a complex and wide-ranging group of discussions. In order to identify the assumptions of the discussions, the issues that have emerged, new insights, oversights, and practical implications of the conference, one is as a matter of course driven back to one's own particular framework. Mine is environmental wethics.

Ethiss is the reflective discipline that attempts to identify and make connections between between human norms and the realities of human history, between the ideal and the real. The vehicle for making the connections is "middle axioms," operative and changeable principles that mediate twbetween first principles(e.g. "love your neighbor as yourself") and socio-empirical observations(e.g. "Boston harbor is polluted").

My overall impression of the conference is that there was astoundingly little articulation of both first principles and middle axioms. This is not to say that people were not morally concerned. On the contrary, the level of moral concern was consistently High. But the presentations and the discussions consistently -- almost at times as if driven by some fear of lapsing into actual ethical reflection -- gravitated to the level of gravel and renovated theatre districts. We were given a multitude of information concernigg a variety of concrete projects involving the coexistence and the interface of rural and urban areas. But rately did anyone actually spend any time articulating

The notable exception to all this were the presentations by Dr. Dubos. But even here I was not sure how his remarks were heard and understood by others. How many of the conference participants had a speaking acquaintance with So Human andAnimal or The God Within? How many of the participants were making the ethical and metaphysical connections between what Dr. Dubos said in his illuminating remarks and his own substantive and long-standing humanistic environmental ethics? 1 Taken by themselves, I thought, the Dubos presentations did not really highlight first principles and middle axioms explicitly and substantively, although they were surely vintage Dubos -- always illuminating, always compelling -- at every turn.

All this is not to suggest that first principles and middle axioms were not implicitly present in every discussion. The conference was a rich -- and sometimes disquieting -- plethora of such principles and axioms, for anyone who had eyes to see. But it all came across mainly as moral passion focused on practical issues, with little or no articulation of the values presupposed and operative. Why did anyone want to focus on city and rural areas anyway? Why did the planners choose the particular case studies they did? Why did the planners choose the topics they did? Why did they choose the particular participants they did? What were the overall goals of the conference? Questions such as these begged to be asked at every turn. Likewise for every individual presentation.

It was clear to me that the conference would have been much helped -- if would have been much more humanistic and less typically pragmatic-American -- if some actual spokespersons from the humanistic disciples were given some platform at the conference, if not equal time.

In a certain sense, now, all that water is already over the dam. Even so, I would like to illustrate what I mean by coming at the discussion not so much critically now as constructively. I hope these considerations will help wiyhethe planning of future conferences.

Close at hand for me, as one who served as an official observer at the World Counsil of Church's July, 1979 conference onf"Science, Faith, and the Future," is the set of first principles that that body takes as normative as it approaches the great moral challenges of the world today. According to the WCC, we all should be working for a global society that is just, participatory, and sustainable. I would want to expand that shorthand statement if I were to claim it personally as my own; but it can surely stand as it is for my purposes here, inview of the consensus that it represents.

My first observation on the basis of this set of first principles regard the conference participants: it was an international conference. But -- however congenial -- it was in fact not at all representative of poor and Third World perspectives generally: it was rather elétist. To that dagree, it was scarcely participatory. It was remarkable, for example, to have a conference a stone's throw from New York City and to have the Bronx represented by Edward Logue only and no folks from the impoverished constituency that Mr. Logue is seeking to serve.

My other observations are more theoretical, many of which I alwady shared with conference participants at the very end, in a rather hasty way.

Nothwithstanding Dr. Dubos' protestations to the contrary, I must still question his maxim, so often heard at the conference, "think globably, act locally." As a long-standing reader of his works, I think that I agree with him when he makes this statement. But I believe that in itself it is too mu h an unstabe compound; or, better, it is

too chameleon-like. Too much depends on its socio-cultural context. Read too long ago, for example, George Ball wrote ap paean of praise for the growing world hegemony of the transnational corporation: it is bringing order to the world, he argued, and a general increase of world economic productivity. Soon, he concluded, the whole world will be ruled by the "objective logic of profit." Now we know that there is no group of people in the world who are, formally speaking, better at thinking globably and acting locally than the planners and the managers of the transnational corporations. But, among other things, in their agribusiness form they are driving small farmers off their lands in third world countries, into cities to live in impoverished hovels, meanwhile reducing food production for local consumption and producing monoculture items, such as coffee or bananas, for export to wealthy countries such as the U.S. That is a striking example of thinking globally and acting locally. Obviously, that is not what Dr. Dubos means by his maxim; but that is what it could easily be taken to mean -- and I suppose that the drug company that ran that maxim as a full page newspaper add may have understood it more in terms acceptable to George Ball than to René Dubos.

So, with a view to the previously mentioned IWWCC first principles, I propose to specify Dr. Dubos middle axiom, think globably, act locally, with the following qualifying emmendations and amplifications, accepting his overall notion of the necessity of a global vision and a commitment to concrete, grass-roots action in service of that vision; however parochial that action might seem to be.

Think globably, act ecologically. We know, environmentally speaking, that there is "no such thing as a free lunch." So natural or human system must always payes price for any program. The conference's focus on Lincoln, Mass., for example, did not seem to sufficiently

recognize how Lincoln itself is an energy drain(depending on Boston Edison and its nuclear power stations!) and an only apparently innocent food consumer(e.g. Peruvian fish flower fed to cattle in polluting feed-lots shipped with the expendituredof considerable energy to New England). If the Lincoln experiment were genuinely thought through in global, ecological terms, for example, it might have had some kind of socio-political structure from the start that gave support to the development of small generation hydro-electric power and indigenous(and, stop the expansion of black top!) agriculture in New England.

Think globably, act communally. How much does our American image of proper land use, whether the wilderness or land adjacent to cities, presuppose what Kenneth Boulding called the cowyboy economy and the philosophical iddividualism of the Marlboro man? HOW MUCH How much does it presuppose the matrix of the commonwealth, the community, the kibbutz? The conference participants seemed to assume that a movement toward social solidarity, away from the rank individualism of the American past, is to be preferred, whether in contemporary Israel, the areas served by TVA, or Lincoln, Mass. But are we really ready now to move toward creating the economic institutions -- "economic demouracy" -- internationally, nationally, regionally, or locally, that make this kind of social solidarity possible? Or is the issue of urban-rural land to be solved, as it always has been in American history, by a powerful elite? Already we see signs of a in-migration of the wealthy from the green belts around cities to the inner cities("gentrification"): the poor may be on their way into suburban slums, perhaps replete with trees. Is that the kind of society we want to live in?

Think globally, act distributively. Much that needs to be said under this heading, for purposes of these reflections, has

already been said. I will make only one more cryptic remark here We need an ethic for corporate power, as much as we need an urban ethic and a land ethic. It will do no good to us to bring moral judgment to bear on questions such as people's need for vital hopefully face-to-face dimensioned urban centers and green spaces and wilderness, as well, if we do not also bring moral judgment to bear -- rigorous analytic and prophetic judgment -- on the corporate interests that make for shopping centers, highways, high energy consumption, and centralization of power in the hands of a few

Think globably, act peacefully. We may not have a green world of any kind to live in, if the arms race continues as it is How are the new communities that we are envisioning, then, to structure into themselves the individual and social motivation to revise the war machine? Sadly, one can say many good things about TVA or the redeveloped Bronx or a well-planned Lincoln, Mass But not one of them seem to have been devised with any kind of community structures -- discussion groups, local caucuses, coalitions, etc. -- that have anything to do with the horrendous business of bringing moral, political, and economic pressure to bear on the war machine.