THE FAITH IN FAITH, SCIENCE AND THE FUTURE

Faith, Science and the Future, a collection of essays compiled by the World Council of Churches as preparatory material for its July, 1979 conference, exposes the reader to many of the problems facing humanity. Entire chapters are devoted to the topics of hunger, energy, costs and benefits of technology, economic and political structures and the quality of life, and yet these chapters are able to give only an overview of the issues. The varied viewpoints of the different writers are apparent. The nature of the readings precluded any integration of the various arguments and approaches; indeed, the purpose of the book may have been to point out the wide spectrum of positions. But the reader is left with a vague sense of uneasiness. He is given little sense of how he as an individual should cope with these problems or what he or his faith has to contribute to any solutions. A sense of immediacy and motivation for action is missing. Given these readings, one wonders whether the conference in July will be simply another international conference for discussion of the world's problems, whose participants happen to be mostly Christians, or whether the fact that Christians are discussing these issues will result in any new contributions to the world-wide debate.

This paper was written by a group of young people, most from M.I.T. and the Harvard Divinity School, who met weekly for several months to discuss Faith, Science and the Future. We have not yet started our professional careers as scientists, engineers, ministers or church workers, but in preparation for them we have all struggled with the serious issues raised in the readings. Not yet expert in particular disciplines, but each familiar with a different area of knowledge, we thought we might profit from struggling together for a while. We would like to share our reactions to the preparatory materials.

We acutely felt the need to discern the place of faith in the issues presented by the readings. Our non-Christian colleagues often ask why the churches are even interested in such problems, and within our own Christian communities, perhaps regrettably, we are asked for a clear articulation of the connection between faith in Jesus Christ and such "secular" matters as nuclear power and transfer of technology. In short, people of all persuasions are asking what is "Christian" in the upcoming conference.

The readings do give a clear statement of how the World Council of Churches became involved in these matters. They present theological thought on man's relationship to God and to Creation, and indicate, to varying degrees, the deep ethical and moral decisions that must be made about such issues as biological research, energy and economic growth. But in the course of discussing the readings we kept returning to one basic question: Does our being Christians affect the way we approach these problems? Much of the book seemed to be written as if the answer to this question was "no." For example, the focus of Chapter Five, "Rethinking the Criteria for Quality of Life," was on the organization of economic activity and on the design of parameters to measure such things as pollution and unemployment. The underlying philosophical questions were also mentioned, and surely all this is important. But should not we, as Christians, have a little more to say about the quality of life beyond speaking in broad, philosophical terms and focusing on specific indices of this or that? The point is not that these things should not be discussed, but rather does it make any difference that it is the World Council of Churches discussing them? If it hardly matters when considering a prophetic and visionary topic such as the quality of life,

then it matters even less when debating alternative energy policies or discussing the technological threat to the oceans.

This might not be an issue for the conference's deliberation, but every participant should at least consider it and formulate his or her own response. That response might provide a point of reference from which to consider the other issues. In formulating our response, we had to speak from our own experience of faith. It is, of course, the experience of a particular group of people in a particular place. The fact that we do not presume to speak for all Christians in all places, however, emphasizes the need for each participant to examine his or her own faith and experience and to come up with an answer. We feel that there are indeed elements in our faith that prepare us, and in fact propel us into the struggle.

It seems obvious to us that our Christian faith calls us to engage in the struggle for a more just, participatory and sustainable society: there is a Biblical call to social action. The exhortation in Micah to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God; the second great commandment, to love one's neighbor as oneself; the parable of the Good Samaritan; the account of the separation of the sheep from the goats at the Last Judgment -- these are but four examples. We believe that the messages of Holy Scripture are timeless and universal. So when we read the Bible, we see not only the shepherds and fishermen of Galilee and the Pharisees and tax collectors in the temple in Jerusalem; we also see the discouraged unemployed laborers in our crowded cities, the hungry children in our countrysides and the suffering refugees in war-torn countries. In order to live our faith, to bear witness to God's love for us and to its healing and transforming power, we seek ways in which science and technology can serve us in our efforts to feed

and heal a hungry and broken world. We strive to combat the ways in which science and technology are used to maintain the status quo, to enslave people and to threaten God's creation.

Our faith provides not only motivation for action, but also a particular approach to the difficult task of making decisions in the face of complexity, ambiguity and human limitation. Although there are no ready-made answers, no obvious Christian responses, to the problems presented in the readings, our faith informs our attitudes and our perspectives. This is important, because the decisions we ultimately make will depend not only upon the scope of our scientific knowledge and our technical ingenuity, but also upon the priorities we set, the approaches we take, our vision of the future and our beliefs about how much we can hope to accomplish. The author of Chapter Three listed a number of "distinctive accents" that Christians can bring to cooperative efforts. But we found ourselves emphasizing other accents, not included in that list, which were also muted or absent in many of the other chapters. These accents--~~on the need for humility,~~ on human imperfection, on the importance of individual action--do have consequences for the way we respond to problems. This emphasis may at first seem pessimistic and debilitating. But Christian hope does not lie in any vision of an earthly utopia, but rather in God's promise that his will and purpose will ultimately be fulfilled. To believe that we can build the kind of world we want by our own efforts is dangerous false hope.

The author of Chapter Nine wrote about "...a form of Christian realism which assumes that history cannot suddenly be reversed, which accepts the ambiguity of all human endeavour and which recognizes that a thin line often separates humanity from disaster in the use of what its technological ingen-

uity has unleased."[1] Throughout our discussions we explored the meaning of "Christian realism." We found that our faith does equip us with realism, and in our view an important contribution of Christian faith to the struggle for a more just, participatory and sustainable society is the humility and realistic hope that our faith provides.

One of the most daunting aspects of our current problems is their complex interrelatedness, which imposes severe restraints on our ability to make decisions. Our attempts to feed the world's hungry, for example, may be frustrated on the one hand by natural limits to energy resources and to the earth's ability to absorb increasing amounts of pesticides and chemical fertilizers, and on the other hand by skewed economic patterns and the lack of man-made structures, such as transportation systems, which would facilitate a more just distribution of food. In many instances there is an inadequate body of knowledge, and gathering more information requires a longer time than is available. This is all very frustrating, but our understanding of the Bible should help to prevent Christians from falling into an attitude of hopeless confusion or paralysis. We are not the creators of our world, and we accept that God's wisdom is greater than our own. We do not expect to understand or control it completely.

We know that we are not well-served by grandiose or oversimplified schemes which reflect an exaggerated faith in man's ability to control nature. Sometimes these schemes arise from tunnel vision, from the attempt to solve one problem without considering the effects that the proposed solutions may have on other parts of the natural and social environment. At other times they appear attractive because they lend themselves to sloganeering and easily

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[1] Faith, Science and the Future, p. 113

command popular support. But a bold, dramatic stroke applied to the complex tissue of an ecosystem can have severe side-effects. For example, in the United States there have been zealous attempts to "eradicate" certain insect pests by spreading large amounts of chemical pesticides over wide areas. The insects were not eradicated, since populations eventually arose which were resistant to the pesticides. Moreover, the unintended results of these campaigns included enormous destruction of wildlife, cases of poisoning among humans and livestock and, ironically, the emergence of new pests in the form of other insect species whose predators had been destroyed by the chemicals. This is the kind of approach we simply must avoid, particularly in areas of the earth where we know relatively much less about the interplay of air, soil and water. Many of the technical advances of this century, notably the harnessing of nuclear energy, have dramatized man's power over the earth. But our relatively recent and growing understanding of our biological environment is forcing us into a new appreciation of the balance, complexity and interdependence that we observe. This perspective is reinforced by the Biblical reminder that there are limits to human knowledge and human wisdom. In dealing with the natural environment, there is thus need both for more knowledge and for respect for what we do not understand.

This is not to say that we should be inhibited from acting. There are some things that we clearly do understand. We understand that there are limits to the global stores of fossil fuels and to the earth's ability to absorb pollutants. We understand that there are limits to the patience of the poor. There are signs of strain appearing all over the world which urgently demand a response.

Several of the chapters in Faith, Science and the Future concluded that

an effective response will require greater international cooperation, and some suggested the establishment of agencies such as a world food bank or a world resource bank. It seems to be very difficult both for governments to engage in longterm planning and for groups of nations to cooperate in managing common resources. There is clearly a need for international institutions which will promote such planning and such cooperation. But it is worthwhile reminding ourselves that this is only a preliminary goal. The existence of such structures will not remove the need to make decisions. Planning is necessary to help us make intelligent adjustments to the changes the future will bring, but it will not make the need for those adjustments go away. Nor can our plans be confident programs; our predictive powers and our control over our own destinies are too limited for that. The point is that a call for more planning is not a substitute for a proposed course of action.

Here again we encounter the need to respect complexity. The solutions that we propose must be consistent with political and economic reality. This is not to say that things should stay just the way they are. We must act now, but we must not act precipitately. Our vision of a just, participatory and sustainable society implies radical changes in the structure of human institutions. We must hold fast to that vision. But we cannot create our future with broad, confident strokes. This limited control over our destinies should not exasperate Christians, who accept that the outcome of human history reflects not only man's will, but also God's. To live with the tension between a radical vision and the daunting complexity of Creation, which so often seems to limit our options-- this is one part of Christian realism.

Another part of Christian realism is to acknowledge human sin and human suffering, not as "problems" requiring "solutions," but as inherent parts of

human life. Suffering, to one degree or another, is part of the human experience all over the world. No one is entirely spared from it. The reality of suffering is an integral part of the Christian understanding of life. This understanding is founded on a Biblical principle: that all good things are from God, ours not by right but by grace, and he may require us at any time to give up one thing or another. In the Bible suffering accompanies both the punishment of the unrighteous and the testing of the righteous. It is often presented as a humbling experience, in which the sufferer may prepare himself for communion with God. It is sometimes even equated with virtue: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake."

The problem is that these Biblical notions of the holiness and value of suffering have sometimes been perverted and used by the oppressors of the world to justify their cruelty or their neglect of those who suffer. Lest we be accused of trying to justify the status quo, it is important to emphasize that to impose or to permit suffering is God's perogative, not man's. Suffering is not good, except as we may learn from or be strengthened by bad experiences. Christians have no perverse love of suffering and are permitted to seek escape from it. However--and this is crucial--the needs of those who are worse off take precedence over our own.

The first consequence of this is that Christians cannot be indifferent to those who suffer. Since God loves each person, he is concerned about the pain and suffering of each. We too must be concerned, or we turn our backs on God. It is not something about which we have any choice. To the degree that science and technology contribute to human suffering, and to the degree they may offer ways to alleviate it, we must be concerned with them. And no matter what the particular issue, we must set our priorities so that the needs

of the hungry, the homeless and the distressed come first.

The second consequence is that we must be prepared to make sacrifices. For those of us in wealthy countries this may mean voting for higher taxes, paying higher prices, accepting personal inconvenience or austerity--whatever the best course of action may entail. To remind ourselves of our dependence on God's blessings and to develop the self-discipline required for making sacrifices, Christians have long proclaimed the value of fasting and other forms of voluntary suffering.

The final consequence is that we can not expect to eradicate all of human suffering. Some wealthier nations may already be falling into this trap, as the author of Chapter Six, writing about health care, observed: "Illnesses are conditions we do not wish to tolerate if we can help them; and, as medical skills increase, we tolerate less and less. We hardly tolerate death any more, pushing back its arrival as if immortality were the only acceptable outcome."[2] This unwillingness to recognize that some suffering is part of God's plan and to accept the inevitability of human suffering in an imperfect world is, once more, a failure to be humble.

Christianity asserts the reality of sin and the imperfectibility of human beings and all their institutitions. This is what we mean when we speak of a fallen Creation and original sin. Though we are impelled by love to strive toward a just, sustainable and participatory society, we know that we will not achieve it in this world. Our hopes are high, but we understand failure. Acknowledging failure is another part of the Christian worldview.

We were surprised to find this basic Christian perspective missing from

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[2] Faith, Science and the Future, p. 48.

most of the preparatory readings. We found instead an underlying assumption that more planning, more education and more international conferences will really provide us with ultimate solutions. For example, the author of Chapter Five writes: "A society has a responsibility to integrate with its system of production and distribution a system of social education which will eventually overcome greed and make it possible to provide everyone with an opportunity to contribute his labour to society and to have all his needs provided for by that society."[3] But the belief in human perfectability underlying this kind of statement is contrary to Christian understanding. There is no system of education which will overcome greed, and the kind of society which provide for all of every individual's needs has eluded mankind for centuries.

This attitude is not a perverse negativism. It is a realistic refusal to believe in panaceas. The expectation that our success in problem-solving will be limited at best has important consequences for our approach. Our unwillingness to accept panaceas sharpens our healthy caution, for we do not expect any proposed solution to be without its flaws. Since we expect to fail a certain amount of time, we will be prepared with contingency plans and fall-back positions. More importantly, our spirits will not be crushed if our schemes fall through. We will have to be ready to make compromises and trade-offs; to arrogantly hope for ultimate solutions is to invite cynicism, frustration and despair.

Christianity does not require us to pin our hopes on achieving more than partial success in this world, for the Christian counterpoint to a limited faith in man's abilities is unlimited faith in God. As Christians we have

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[3] Faith, Science and the Future, p. 48.

experienced God's love for humanity. We believe that this love was expressed in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ and that through His death and resurrection the world's future is assured. We believe that God's love continues to be evidenced and experienced and calls us to respond. The resurrection assures us that no matter what nature does, no matter what IBM or OPEC does, and no matter what any government may do, God's good purpose will ultimately prevail. Our difficult job is to decide what will further God's purpose, for we can help or hinder it. We know we will be held accountable for what we do.

Our desire to obey God and to respond to his love for us makes us feel keenly the need to use whatever power we may have to act for the good. All too often, however, we feel that as individuals we have little power, and we noticed a persistent emphasis in the preparatory readings which tended to reinforce this feeling. There were chapters which discussed the stewardship of mankind for the whole earth, but there were no chapters which discussed the stewardship of personal gifts in a scientific or technical vocation. Chapter Six discussed the difficulty of determining which decisions about the use of biological technology properly belong to the individual, to the larger community, and to the state. Such questions also arise concerning the use of other technologies, but they were rarely raised elsewhere in the readings. Instead there was emphasis on the need for regional and global decision making. There certainly is such a need, but there is also a need to encourage and channel individual action. The purpose of the conference in July is not to prescribe for each participant what he or she ought to do. But we need to beware of the illusion that only governments and corporations have the power and the responsibility to act. To speak only of national eco-

nomic planning and international commissions belittles and paralyzes the individual citizen. It makes his contributions seem trivial or onerous and saps his willingness to cooperate and to take on responsibility. We should remember that Jesus called upon us to become "the salt of the earth" and compared us to the little bit of leaven that makes the whole loaf rise.

As each of us seeks to play his or her part in carrying out God's purpose, there are other Biblical images which can guide us, depending on the situation: we have been appointed to fulfill the roles of priest, prophet and prince. One job of the priest is to conserve what God has given. We have been given the earth and our fellow human beings; consequently we are responsible for them. If people are going hungry, we will have to feed them. If the air and water are polluted, and living things are dying because of it, then we will have to reduce pollution. But to prevent conservation from developing into conservatism, we have also been appointed prophets. We are charged to criticize the present state of affairs and to hold forth the vision of God's love and purpose. If the international economic order is unjust, we must change it. If some people are oppressed by others, we must clearly reject that evil and fight against it. But to keep our criticism from being cheap because we think we have no responsibility, we have been appointed princes as well. We have been given the responsibility of caring for the world and our fellow creatures, and we will be judged on the quality of our administration. We cannot argue that it is none of our business.

Priest, prophet and prince are images of power. The paradox of Christianity is that we can fulfill these roles only as servants. Our faith requires us to be humble, which may be the very basis of our ability to cope with the ambiguity of science and technology and their uses in the present

world. Christian realism is the perspective gained from knowing that our efforts will be judged by a standard outside this world. It is an acknowledgement of our limited abilities, but also a recognition of what can be achieved within those limitations. We know that regardless of what we do God's purpose will be accomplished. But we are still responsible for our actions. We know that the basic nature of humanity is corrupt, but also that redemption is possible. We know that we will often fail, but what we do achieve is important. We cannot believe in instant solutions or that mankind will ever create the perfect society. But neither can we sit back in the belief that change is not possible or necessary, that the contributions of indivituals and communities are not important, or that one solution is as good as any other.

We do not claim that these insights are unique to Christianity. But addressing the problems presented in the preparatory readings will require difficult, sustained effort, and if there is anything in our faith that will nourish us in this process and maintain our continued struggle, we should acknowledge it and hold fast to it. Then we can plunge into debate on the issues. If we know our equipment before we begin, we will work more effectively. We will cooperate more easily with other concerned people because each will know what the other is bringing to the effort. Building a more just, sustainable and participatory society will not be an easy task, but we have Christ's example before us. We will have to carry our crosses, but, assured of God's love, we may carry them as he carried his--with humility and with hope.