

RECLAIMING THE COMMONS: What Believers Can Do to Save Our Wounded Earth

Executive Summary

Our troubled Earth is witnessing an ecological catastrophe resulting in dramatic climate change that will affect millions. All the while we witness a financial crisis resulting from the greed of a privileged few. Thus we have a dual crisis, or maybe a single one that has ecological and social components. Prophetic voices are saying that the world's wealth and resources do not belong to the select few; they also belong to the poor. This book comes from an insight gained through forty years of environmental work: **the crisis is due to the privileged few;** they misuse the world's resources as though they can do what they wish. Truly, this is a flawed social, economic and political order where the privileged have taken advantage of the lack of governmental controls (through their own connivance) and advanced a culture of selfish consumption and concentration of wealth.

The situation is legitimized by the chaplains of the privileged, who paint a veneer of religiosity and affirm the "divine right" for them to acquire more wealth. Since the advent of globalization, the disparity between the wealthy and the poor has accelerated; the misuse of wealth occurs while thousands die each day from lack of proper food and health services. This unjust situation cries to heaven as a continuing crime against humanity. If proper action is not taken, our Earth will suffer irreversible harm and the social structures of society will be fractured. Believers must act now!

Maximizing monetary profits and greater consumption of material resources lead to further pollution (one new coal-fired powerplant is constructed per week in China alone). Un- or under-regulated materialistic aspirations become contagious and infect emerging peoples who seek to join the global privileged class. The challenge does not just rest with recognizing the financial and ecological crises as interconnected; the real problem is how to deal with the situation -- though our religious traditions do give us some clues as to how to act: love, compassion, sharing within the human family, raising up the poor, and caring for creation.

The first part of the book presents the situation and alternative ways of dealing with it. In Chapter One we begin with the glory and beauty of God's creation, a stance that calls for respect for all gifts that have been given to us. However, we do not have time to bask in glory for, as democratic citizens, we are shaken by the need to use resources properly as responsible stewards. Believers must speak out or, after a hiatus caused by the current recession, the world will return to consumption practices that are business as usual, namely, accelerated degradation of our wounded Earth. Will the only difference

between a few years ago and tomorrow be that the consumer ranks will swell by tens of millions of Chinese and Indians?

One response to the disparity between rich and poor is to persuade the wealthy to voluntarily give to the destitute in "charity." However, such voluntary options are too slow and uncertain, and involve the exercise of power by the rich; greed remains unchecked and the faithless will thwart meaningful voluntary efforts. Another response is revolutionary, namely, arouse the poor to take what is rightly theirs, for the **commons** belongs to all. However, although this approach is enticing to impatient activists, it would lead to more terrorism and bloodshed, for the wealthy who control the military/industrial complex will not surrender their privileges without countermeasures of violence.

A **Third Way** involves performing all functions of social and ecological enhancement and preservation at the most local level possible, and then moving to broader levels where the need is clearly demonstrated (practical application of the **Principle of Subsidiarity**). Thus regional, national and international cooperative ventures emerge, since not all essential resources can be marshalled at the local level. Preserving democracy entails regulatory methods and taxation policies to control and reapportion resources at each respective level. However, reclaiming the commons is more than redistribution; appropriate conservation measures and fair taxes are needed at the various levels of governance. Removal of tax havens are utterly necessary at the international level. Furthermore, a **Global Development Fund** must be established through tithing of military budgets and comparable amounts from rich less militarized nations.

In Chapter Two, we emphasize that all must join the struggle to reclaim the commons. The message that we must defend the democratic enterprise against economic "nobles" is surprising, but unfortunately that is the case today in virtually every country of the civilized world. A Third Way based on democratic principles and social justice, on cooperation and on limits to wealth starts to emerge. The current capitalistic system is outmoded and the cause of extreme consumption of resources; passively allowing this system to remain unchallenged is to damage our democratic process.

In Chapter Three, we delve into the parts of the commons that need protection. Infringement of the commons comes from abuse of human rights to adequate food, water, affordable housing, fuel, health and safety protection, education, meaningful work, public assembly and worship, access to green space, and freedom of movement of people and goods. In order to preserve and enhance our access to these rights we look at the vast array of resources available to guarantee a higher quality of life for all: fresh air, pure water, outer space, vast oceans, airwaves and the Internet, migratory wildlife, Antarctica, silent space, fragile and productive lands, forests and wilderness, cultural sites, intellectual achievements and on and on.

A second part of this book relates to practical applications in order to bring about a Third Way. Chapter Four deals with a realistic goal -- a global commons. This commons evolves spatially to include all people on this Earth in their respective local communities; this commons also includes the well-being of all flora and fauna on this planet; it demands incorporating our historic past and achieving our shared future. The global commons is a divine gift requiring our cooperative efforts here and now in order to grow organically. Achieving this commons requires ideal citizens or "commoners," who are committed to working together for common goals. Furthermore, from their ranks come agents of change who bring out the best qualities of all.

Chapter Five discusses the problems involved with giving and taking by those in power, the leaders, and shows the reasons for moving to this **Third Way** that overcomes the sense of material privilege. A selection of social, economic, religious, political and cultural issues is discussed as a background for practical actions with an emphasis on practical implementation.

Chapter Six includes the mandate that all must participate, each in his or her own way. References to literature on simple living are listed but the contents are not repeated. However, we need to be reminded that undertaking individual actions permits us to walk gently on our wounded Earth, to be in solidarity with the poor both near and far, to cooperate in regional programs, to act democratically, to pressure for proper governmental regulations, and to grow in a global consciousness.

Chapter Seven includes a wide variety of local, regional, national and international programs dealing with each of the areas of the commons deserving attention and support. Among the forty-eight examples are creating public potable water projects, preserving endangered languages, and establishing a global maritime corps. The listing is partial and invites enlargement and modification by those working in the respective fields. However, current regulatory frameworks must be broadened to allow such enterprises. If an emerging **Third Way** is to be participative, cooperative, and non-violent, a United Nations or its equivalent with enforcement powers is needed to assume growing responsibilities in both protecting and distributing the common resources. Nations must surrender their powers to a higher body, for certain responsibilities surpass the abilities of existing governments acting alone and in concert with a small number.

We conclude that the possibility and catalyst for implementing this **Third Way** must come from people of faith. This involves convincing others that resources must be directed to a service economy rather than primarily to a consumption based one; efforts must be focused on showing that materialistic profit motivation is limited and corrosive. A better quality of life requires a balanced use of resources with a "profitable"

motivation being spiritually-based and beneficial for all people.
Faith in the future is essential to a successful reclamation of
the commons.