

## **WHAT COULD I DO ABOUT THAT? SOME PROPOSALS TO SET A CHECKLIST FOR AN ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY CHRISTIAN (EFC ?!)**

4 February 2001

Dealing with environment, it is easy to focus about massive planetary questions (e.g., pollution, greenhouse effect, global warming, extinction of animal species, unequal distribution of resources). However, not under-evaluating the importance of environmental debate, for Christians the environment is God's creation, so it should not be something indifferent or far away, a thing to be delegated to governments and non-governmental organisations to cope with.

Think of one of the most current definitions of *sustainable development*: 'A development which is able to ensure a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come'. This is instead what God said to Abraham: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing [...] I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you" (Gen. 12.1-2 and 17.6). In a sense also to be Christians is something about "a better quality of life". What is therefore that makes Christians so often reluctant to think and act about environmental questions? Surely, what the governments have set (think of Agenda 21) is a plan of action about sustainable development and what God proposes to Abraham is a plan of action again (Go...and I will...). So, this is probably what we need, a personal plan of action about environment tailored for us, but inspired to the checklist of an environmental manager.

This talk is about ideas for setting a personal checklist of things we could do with little money (even if not without effort) for a change in lifestyle that could be beneficial for us, for the environment and would allow us to contribute to the solution of the big problems. In addition, this talk aims also to show how the roots of our effort to set this plan of action are deeply planted on the Bible tree: that is to say, we are not alone.

## 1. Introduction

When Christians are faced to environment and to environmental concerns, there are different possibilities: “No, thanks, I am a Christian” is one of them. Apparently, this refuse even to think to environment is based on the Bible and mostly on the Genesis: “God blessed them and said to them, -Be fruitful in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves along the ground”. This part of the Bible was seen as promoting aggression and dominion over the whole nature. In the words of Ian Mac Harg, a pioneer of ecological planning: “The Biblical creation story of the first chapter of Genesis...in its insistence upon dominion and subjugation of nature, encourages the most exploitative and destructive instincts in man rather than those that are deferential and creative”<sup>1</sup>. However, in the real world, a number of Christian ecological organisation exist and this may sound strange, if the Genesis has to be interpreted in this way. The fact is that not many verses below this first passage, a second passage says: “The Eternal placed the Human Being in the Garden of Eden to till it and to tend it”. (Gen. 2:15) and other passages from the Psalms<sup>2</sup> tend to confirm that the Earth is not ours, but was just given to us to live by God, as Donald De Young states: " The first part of the command is being fulfilled, with a current world population of more than five billion people. The subduing of the earth involves rulership. We have been placed in charge of the earth as stewards. The earth does not belong to us; it is the Lord's, including everything in it"<sup>3</sup>. So, men had a sort of stewardship over the world. A stewardship requires to be effective that the steward has a sensible attitude. Indeed, there is a number of Christian virtues, coming from the Bible that are useful for us, if we are going to have such an attitude. From the less difficult to the most, these are: attention<sup>4</sup>, prudence<sup>5</sup>, donation (of our things, of our life; to others, to God)<sup>6</sup> and finally love<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Jan L. McHarg, Design with nature, Garden City, Doubleday & Co., NY, 1969, p.26.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 96:11-13 and Psalm 14:1-13

<sup>3</sup> Donald DeYoung, Weather and the Bible, pgs. 140-142, published by Baker Book House and Ps. 24:1

<sup>4</sup> Luke 9,17

<sup>5</sup> 1Pt. 4,7-10

<sup>6</sup> Numbers 15,17-20

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 13,4

Then, there is the other side of the question, the environmental one: environmental managers use to make checklists when they go to industries, etc., to see if they respond to environmental standards (ISO 14000, etc.). We could set a little list for ourselves, just seven bullets, to build up the EFC (Environmentally Friendly Christian):

## **2. Possible actions**

### **Good housekeeping**

Everyone knows what is good housekeeping, in a sense is one thing all of us need to have our life established in a comfortable pattern. Our society goes on because someone cleans our office and University labs. (well, not so frequently...). What is a good housekeeping from an environmental point of view? The first thing is not to throw away what could be useful to someone. And a second thing could be to know exactly (well, almost) what I have at home, what I need and what I could give to others. In Italy I worked four years in Research Centre of the European Commission. Well, we were there all aware of the need to recycle and whatsoever, but when it came to personal practice something different happened. We had very nice (and very large) steel bins labelled as "recycle paper". In these bins a lot of "almost new" large red or black folders were thrown away. Many are still in my home reused. What one could do in this regard? They could have asked to other secretaries, to students (we had a lot of PhD and MSc students, and they always need folders, and have to pay for them). So, this becomes a Christian attitude, this is *sharing*: I suggest that before throwing away anything, that could still be useful, but takes some place, in our home or office, we have a quick look around to see if someone could be interested to them.

### **Use less material**

A good friend of mine works in Italy in a company that produces switches. Well, the scenario is changed so much during last two decades about buying a switch.

Scenario of the eighties: you went to your electricity shop and said. - Good morning, I would like to buy a switch - and the person replied: - Here is your switch - and, if he/she was particularly polite, added: - Do you want a piece of paper to wrap it?-

Scenario of year 2000: - Good morning, I would like to buy a switch -. - Here is your switch in its gorgeous plastic case. Every switch is packed in a specially designed plastic case -. And you get out from the shop, use the switch and throw its gorgeous plastic case in the bin.

Then, I asked to my friend: -And what is the function of the plastic case? Nothing, just the switches are more marketable like that. Consider that the plastic case is far less stiff than the switch is -. So, if you are involved (hopefully not) in a car crash just out from the electrician shop, your switch will be bent anyway.

You can say: "Well, this is industrial practice about marketing and we cannot do anything about it". This is not completely true in a sense. Industrials have for interest selling more: some clear messages from consumers have already been given about GM foods, therefore why not send messages about unnecessary packaging and waste of material that has no function? An example could be trying to buy only things without plastic containers, if this proves not to be possible, you could also write letters of complaint to the company or to call to their customer service. This may create a kind of general opinion against excessive use of plastics and unnecessary packaging and could orient in a different way also marketing surveys. Something similar is gradually happening for food, more and more little quantities of food are offered rather than big boxes available for all the family. One of the greatest temptations today is the "buy one get one free". And what if I am alone? I could invite a friend and share. The important thing is not to throw away the "one free".

### **Short cuts (optimising the process)**

To spare money and save the environment, environmental managers suggest to cut short any process, when it is possible. So you will never heat for 10 minutes a material that needs only 5 minutes to be at the right temperature for you to process it. However, that's what we so often do. In my dining room the telly is on, but I am in the kitchen at the moment. And how many unnecessary lights are on as well, wasting my money and create the need to produce some electricity more. And what about the PC screen left unattended and turned on the whole weekend. Passing from electricity to our way of living, if you walk along, say, Middleton Boulevard the morning at nine, you find many cars going in both directions, often even queuing. If you look in these cars, in most of them there is one person alone. Are we sure that there is not

a neighbour, a friend or a colleague that wouldn't need a lift, since he is going in the same place where I am going or very close and will be delighted to reciprocate e.g., tomorrow? This could be a starting point to reduce the pollution, so to enjoy finally a better life and in addition, this is perfectly Christian.

If I am in an office, should I not use the back of most of the sheets I print as scrap paper or better could I not photocopy them on both sides? Do I really need to have this document printed or couldn't I send it directly by E-Mail? One of the things I was amazed here in the UK is to see that close to the cash machine, there is a bin for the unwanted balance sheets? But, if we don't need a balance sheet, why don't we just ask for our balance to be visualised on the screen and then spare some paper and energy again?

### **Do it another way**

If cutting short the process does not allow us to get a sufficient economy, we could think of something more radical. For example, it is very likely that the house where we live is not energy-efficient. Windows are they sealed or leave some air pass, so that I need more heating than I would have needed with perfectly sealed windows? Is my boiler perfectly working and clean? Do I make the most of natural light? Could I just change the curtains or paint one wall and get a brighter atmosphere (and having more light reflected?). And, just outside my house, is my car efficient?

And if this does not apply to my house, think of my office or of my Church. For example, religious communities represent an enormous amount of consumer power in their choices about what goods they purchase, how they travel, where they get their food, and how they dispose of waste. To a larger scale, one could think of using sun or wind energy: for example, Bomin-Solar, a Swiss-German consortium, is even now selling a small scale low temperature Stirling cycle water pump / generator. The power is a plate on top, encased in clear plastic. Put it in the sun and it pumps.

### **Recycle**

The automotive industries, as well as many other industries, have introduced on the market cars that are mainly recyclable at end-life. Metals are separated magnetically or electrically, plastic is

just one type of plastic and in particular, if it is thermoplastic (like polypropylene) is even more recyclable, tyres can be recycled, etc.

However, to collect wastes and prepare them for recycling personally encounters often not negligible problems. I don't leave close to the collection point, hence I should have a car. Why not create therefore a collection point, a simple one, in my house for my family, and for me, or for all people living with me, if we share a house. What is really needed is discipline, as we heard from St. Peter: in a recent meeting of my research group it sorted out that the real problem was not researching or using equipment. One of the main hindrances to the correct work in the lab. Is that the bins are usually overfilled and nobody want to move them, neither the technicians, nor the researchers, and for the cleaners they are too heavy to lift. So, if someone does according to his/her duty, everything goes at its place.

### **Get a new product from waste**

Of course, we don't have the possibilities that are developed by some companies e.g., producing a new concrete material from starch and waste. However, the example of compost is clear to everyone that has a garden, but there are a number of possibilities, for example to use things for handcraft or to produce paper objects. Glass-painting is another idea to revive e.g., the used preserve pots. You could also do something for your children, if you have got them, or for you to play with. We saw with Eugenia in Coventry to a display of children activities in Reggio Emilia pre-schools an elephant that was made with all kind of all objects, it made in cardboard painted in grey, was covered with old buttons and his proboscyde was a gardener tube covered with ironwire. Absolutely impressive, it was about two meters high.

### **Use alternative materials**

I did my PhD on jute reinforced materials, it was rather a case, but I liked it, because I learnt a lot. Let's speak about jute: jute is the common name given to fibre extracted from the stems of plants belonging to the genus *Corchorus*. It is a natural fibre, annually renewable and biodegradable. Yellowish or light brown in colour, jute is known in India as the *golden fibre* for its reflects under a strong lighting. And one thing that was absolutely wonderful in my PhD studies were the microscopy observation of jute and its golden reflects. The bulk of the world

supply of jute is grown in Bangladesh and India. Both countries are large-scale manufacturers of jute goods. Smaller amounts of jute are also grown in China and other tropical countries. Apart from the well known applications in packaging and textiles (carpets, bags), jute natural fibre in the form of an open weave is used in meshes to provide erosion control. These meshes hold seed and soil intact on surfaces requiring immediate stabilisation and protection. The fabrics easily mould the contours, create a microclimate that promotes plant growth and finally decompose once vegetation has been established.

You see the problem: a jute bag lasts for years and then you can throw it away simply by digging a hole and covering it. It will be a good feeding for your plants. But we stopped using jute, only now we are starting again, in India there are cars with internal panels in jute. Speaking of jute fibres (and of sisal, banana, etc.), there is a number of problems. The first is political: the producers are developing countries; second, that plastic looks so easy and friendly, we can have how many plastic bags we need. As a matter of fact, plastic bags are the objects most frequently found around in whatever clearing, even in a demolition. At the end of the day, however, to decompose a polyethylene bag, we need one thousand years of exposition to the sun, which is a long time (in the UK even longer).

### **3. Conclusions**

This presentation dealt with little things that can eventually lead to great results: we can speak about very large environmental questions, but we cannot really do anything for them if we don't set our lifestyle to a true environmental mentality. We all need to start doing very little: a cyclist commented once that he couldn't ever resist for 200 km and more, despite the training, if he thought from the beginning that these were really 200 km. "When I start- he said-, I think just to get to the first traffic light". That's what this talk was about.