

Headline: The moral vacuum at the heart of modernity

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Man and nature are running out of time. That's the core message of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report released earlier this month. UN Secretary-General António Guterres called the report a "code red for humanity." "The evidence is irrefutable: greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuel burning and deforestation are choking our planet and putting billions of people at immediate risk."

What can we, individually and collectively, do about it?

Like the pandemic, the twin effects of climate warming and biodiversity loss are hurting the bottom half of society who are most vulnerable to natural and/or man-made disasters. Indeed, indigenous and native people who live closest to nature, comprising 5-6 percent of world population scattered in remote areas, are likely to face loss of culture, lives, and habitat because all their water, food, and livelihoods will be devastated by climate change.

In essence, we are in an existential situation whereby nature is being destroyed by human excess consumption, which creates pollution and carbon emission. Thus, decisions over climate change, human activities, financialization, and globalization are essentially moral questions over the power to lead us out of the wilderness of nuclear destruction through war or planetary burning.

In his monumental "History of Western Philosophy" (1945), British philosopher Bertrand Russell argued that those in power understand that they have twin powers over nature and political power to rule other human beings. Traditionally, the limits to such power have been God and truth. But today, religions are also in turmoil on what is their role in finding pathways out of the current mess. Furthermore, fake news obscures what is truth.

In this twin injustices against man and nature, people sense that there is both a moral vacuum in globalized modernity, as well as lack of a shared, practical pathway out of planetary destruction. If secular science or politics cannot help us, is religion the solution?

Ironically, religion has played a far larger role in the current quandary than meets the eye.

Two papal bulls empowered the Portuguese and Spanish conquests of new lands in the second half of the 15th century. Papal bulls are public decrees, letters patent, or charters issued by a Catholic pope. The Papal Bull *Romanus Pontifex* issued by Pope Nicholas V in 1455 gave Portuguese King Alfonso the right to "invade, search out, capture, vanquish and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ whatsoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery... to convert them to his profit... [such assets becoming] justly and lawfully acquired."

The Papal Bull *Inter Caetera*, issued after Christopher Columbus returned from America in 1493, not only reinforced the Spanish right to property and slavery seized or colonized from non-Christian kingdoms or pagan natives, but also established the Doctrine of Discovery. This doctrine formed the basis of national and later international laws that gave license to explorers to claim vacant land (*terra nullius*) on discovery. Vacant land meant land not populated by Christians, and thus the

Christian discoverers and occupiers could have legal title to them, regardless of the rights of indigenous peoples.

In short, historically it was the Church that gave the moral blessing for colonization, slavery, and genocide during the Age of Globalization.

How can we move forward morally to create human inclusivity and planetary justice?

Under secular science, the elites that control the media, military, economy, political or social institutions have forgotten that they are not masters of man and nature, but stewards to protect human well-being and nature for future generations. In this polarized age, we forget that the shamans of the indigenous people carry ancient wisdoms about how to live with nature and each other through traditional values, medicine, and shared rituals. The shamans are not seers but healers and carriers of tribal memories and values.

When modern scientists and technocrats have no solutions to present problems except more speed, scale, and scope in the rush to modernity, isn't it time to listen to traditional wisdoms from those who have living but dying memories of how to live with nature and each other?

Without moral bearings, no wonder we have no maps out of the current mess. Asia News Network

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