

## CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

*“We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late... Over the bleached bones and jumbled residue of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: ‘too late.’... Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter — but beautiful — struggle for a new world.”*

Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>1</sup>

*“If we don’t do the impossible, we shall be faced with the unthinkable.”*

Petra Kelly<sup>2</sup>

Some years ago, while working on a project for the Lutheran World Federation, I met a church leader from India who was assisting tribal people in the state of Orissa in their struggles to halt bauxite mining on their lands. Southern Orissa, one of the poorest regions of India, is home to rich bauxite deposits. The mining operations are forcing tribal people off the lands that have sustained them for centuries and into urban destitution. People by the thousands are losing their homes, villages, sacred lands, community, livelihood, and means of maintaining culture. For many, these losses are worse than death. Some have been killed by the repression that met their efforts to organize opposition to the mining operations.<sup>3</sup>

As this leader spoke of his people’s courage and years of perseverance in seeking to save their homes and culture, I could imagine the many products in my home made with aluminum that could come from Orissa –aluminum cans containing beverages and food, construction materials, electronic products, car parts. Which of India’s urban poor were forced into the city by mines that provide the aluminum in my life?

I learned too of people in the Global North “swimming upstream” to counter this injustice, guided by their contacts among the Indian tribal people. The Indian church leader worked for a rural development project sponsored by the United Evangelical Church in India. He and this organization, together with many other NGOs, were assisting the people in their appeals to churches in the mining companies’ host countries. The hope was that the churches would urge the companies to cease the mining operations, and urge their governments to divest from those companies. The church of Norway and the Norwegian government were the first to respond. Following an extensive study by its ethics council, Norway's pension fund (the world's second-largest sovereign wealth fund), sold 13.2 million US dollars’ worth of shares in Vedanta Resources, a British mining company working in Orissa, due to the "systematic" environmental and human rights failures including "forced relocation" of indigenous tribes.<sup>4</sup>

Awareness that all was not well between people like me and many of the world’s impoverished people dawned in me through a film. It was shown to a Lutheran youth group, Luther League, when I was fourteen years old. I watched, aghast, as the film depicted the harsh exploitation of sugar cane workers in the Dominican Republic, and their ensuing suffering. Lines were sharply

portrayed between these workers' nearly insufferable reality and the vast profits made by corporate owners of the sugar industry located in my country. Equally clear and even more troubling to me was the connection between those workers' suffering and what we North Americans eat. I soon learned, to my horror, that this was but one instance in the complex webs of exploitation enabling our extravagant acquisition and consumption.

Years of activism followed. I believed that if the people of my country simply knew what was on the other end of their material wealth, their consumption patterns would change. But merely knowing, I learned, was not enough to enable radical social change toward justice. The chains that bind us into systemic exploitation of others and of the Earth are intricate and cleverly hidden. These chains, however, can be broken and transformed. The world is full of people doing just that. In these pages, we examine these chains as "structural evil," forces that bind our power to live in ways that "love neighbor as self" and to protect Earth's wellbeing. These forces include intricate webs of interrelated power arrangements, ideologies, values, practices, policies, and ways of perceiving reality that span generations and have unintended snowballing consequences.

The language of evil, especially structural or systemic evil, may be misinterpreted in a sense that would severely undermine central points of this book. By structural evil, I do *not* refer to metaphysical forces beyond human agency. To the contrary, while structural evil may be beyond the power of individuals to counter, it is composed of power arrangements and other factors that are humanly constructed and therefore may be dismantled by other human decisions and collective actions.

Facing the structural evil in which one is implicated is dangerous and defeating unless one also explores ways to resist it and dismantle it. Herein, therefore, we also uncover pathways for gaining freedom from "structural evil." They are paths toward a world more oriented around justice and sustainable Earth-human relations.

I write, then, to confront a contradiction and a question of morality that have haunted me since I was fourteen: This land is replete with profoundly caring human beings, motivated not only by self-interest but also by infinite wellsprings of compassion and by desire for justice and goodness. And yet everyday life, a "good life" in the United States, entails consumption, production, and acquisition patterns that threaten Earth's capacity to sustain life as we know it, and exploit vast numbers of people worldwide, some even unto death. Our ways of life and the economic policies that make them possible, contribute to severe, even deadly, poverty and ecological degradation on massive scales. This assertion may seem untenable or outrageous to readers not familiar with it. I ask only that you allow it to unfold in the pages of this book, and especially in the boxed stories spread throughout. This link between our relative affluence and the poverty of many, I refer to as "economic violence." The ecological aspects of it – introduced below – constitute "ecological violence."

With climate change, economic and the ecological violence fuse. Law Professor Amy Sinden writes regarding climate change: "The haves of the world are responsible for the vast majority of the greenhouse gases that have already accumulated, and yet it is the have-nots who are likely to bear the brunt of its effects.... this crisis divides us both in terms of culpability and

vulnerability.”<sup>5</sup>

The devastating hand of economic violence is not limited to other lands. It strikes incessantly in the US as well, and has been all the more virulent with the rise of neo-liberal economic globalization in the late 1970’s through today. Of the “new financial wealth created by the [U.S.] American economy” from 1983 through 2004, 94% went to the richest 20% of the nation’s people. It should come as no surprise then that the most recent census shows nearly half (48 percent) of [U.S.] Americans are either poor or low-income.<sup>6</sup>

The “sinking abyss of poverty” now traps all kinds of Americans.<sup>7</sup> However, the poor in this country are disproportionately women and people of color.<sup>8</sup> That racial wealth gap is the “largest since the government began publishing such data a quarter century ago.”<sup>9</sup> Poverty today in the United States is devastating; it renders countless children malnourished and without homes or healthcare. I recall the sinking feeling when I learned that many of the homeless people in my city, Seattle, are children whose parents or parent work but are not paid enough to cover the rent.

Ecocide and economic violence, moreover, are not the most brazen manifestations of systemic evil in our day.<sup>10</sup> Greater still are their seductive guise as “good” to many who “benefit” materially from them. People of economic privilege live and breathe as players in a great “masquerade of evil.” Most of us do so unintentionally and unwittingly. As a whole, we do not fully recognize the vast wealth discrepancy, poverty, and ecological degradation that haunt our country and our world. United States society – the society most linked with controlling political-economic powers – generally promotes the excessive consumption and wealth accumulation enabled by prevailing economic arrangements as a good life. In general, we demonstrate effective allegiance to this way of life and the political-economic alignments that enable it.

Said differently, the prevailing social order morally legitimates our exploitative ways of life by failing to effectively recognize them as such. Structures of exploitation persist and grow when people who benefit from them fail to recognize and resist them. This moral oblivion and the ensuing abdication of moral power are pernicious forms of sin pervading our society, and must therefore be faced practically and theologically. In this book, I seek to do so.

Assumed powerlessness in the face of systemic evil is a fundamental problem of contemporary United States society. It is a society rich with compassionate and well-intentioned people who, nevertheless, live in ways that spell death for many of Earth’s most impoverished human beings and for the planetary web of life. I write for these dangerous people, and as one of them. What does it mean for us, killers, to claim moral lives? Morality and Christian ethics in the context of systemic evil that parades as good is the focus of this book.

The ensuing decades between the film and this book have taken me through worlds of action and inertia, guilt and forgiveness, hopelessness and hope, the stifling pain of powerlessness and moral power. Some of these experiences appear in the pages of this volume. What I have learned creates this project’s purpose and starting points.

### **Purpose and Starting Points**

My purpose is not to instill guilt in the “over-consuming class.” Experience convinces me that guilt about my participation in exploitative social structures does not engender moral power to seek justice. Rather, guilt can breed a sense of subtle or overt powerlessness; moral paralysis ensues.

My purpose, rather, is to nourish moral-spiritual power for imagining, recognizing, forging, and adopting ways of life that build equity among human beings and a sustainable relationship between the human species and our planetary home. (By “ways of life,” I mean over-arching principles, policies and practices applied on household, corporate, institutional, and government levels.) Moving in that direction requires recognizing truths about society that most people strive to avoid.

I believe that vast numbers of “us,” the “over-consumers,” would refuse to comply with economic and ecological exploitation if we truly recognized the pain, suffering, and damage caused by the ways that we live *and* if we could envision viable alternatives. This simple statement belies an extraordinarily complex claim. My intent in this book is to play it out by enabling moral vision. That is, clearer vision of: 1) the consequences of economic and ecological injustice woven into our lives; 2) more just and sustainable alternatives; and 3) moral-spiritual power for embracing these alternatives. For me, that moral-spiritual power lies in a trust that the sacred forces of life, known in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions as God, is coursing through all of creation, and is bringing about healing and liberation despite all evidence to the contrary. This threefold moral perception breaks through moral oblivion and is a central theme of this book.

The next three chapters focus on the first of these fields of vision. They may be difficult to read because the realities they expose are fiercely painful. Later chapters move on to view alternatives and moral spiritual power for living into them. This is crucial. As an educator committed to the moral task of opening eyes to social injustice, I am convinced of this: it is unwise to face the realities of structural injustice and one’s complicity with it without also viewing paths out of that injustice and sources of moral power for treading them. Herein, we do so.

Finally, I am not asking you to take on another cause – be it poverty, environmental degradation, economic exploitation, or other. Rather I am inviting you and myself to perceive more fully:

- the profound necessity of radical change in foundational aspects of the way “we” live,
- the shape of that change and paths toward it, and
- sacred power at work in the world to bring abundant life for all.

It is my fervent hope that you and I will experience a growing sense of power and hope for living into those paths and that sacred power. Without awareness of this purpose it would be difficult to understand the chapters to come.

Knowing my theological starting point is equally important. I start with the conviction that all of creation is embraced by a Love that “will not cease in all the endless ages to come.”<sup>11</sup> It is a Love both intimately personal – for every one of us without exception, embracing our very being – and expanding vastly beyond the person to envelop creation as a whole.<sup>12</sup> This Love is more magnificent than we can imagine. It is luring us and the entire creation toward a world in which

justice and compassion are lived in their fullness by all. Our primary calling in life is to receive and trust this justice-making and compassionate Love, and to live it into the world.

I believe that this Love remains fully with and for us all, regardless of whatever we do or are. Neither our participation in structural evil nor whatever evil deeds we do as individuals can diminish it. Of this conviction, I became fully aware when my mother was brutally murdered by three young men. It was clear to me from the first that these men remained embraced by the Love of God regardless of what they had done. God's love for them and hunger for their wholeness and well-being was not diminished. This deep-seated knowing led me to advocate against the death penalty for these men. That nothing in this world or beyond it can separate us individually or collectively from this Love, and that we have it as pure gift, is known theologically as grace.<sup>13</sup> Trust in the steadfastness of this Love enables me to face the horror of my own participation in systemic evil, and thus to repent.

To begin with faith claims is dangerous. It could imply that this book is not relevant for people outside of these claims. *Be assured that it is not important for the reader to share this faith perspective, only to be aware of it in order to understand the grounding of the work to come.*

Two other motivations beyond the aforementioned theological claims motivated this project. One is outrage that a small portion of the world's people are disproportionately responsible for severe ecological degradation, yet others, who bear far less responsibility for the ecological disasters at hand, suffer first and foremost from them. Equally important as a motivating force is the beauty and sacredness of creation. The extravagant beauty surrounding and imbuing this planet's living beings, and the life force pulsing within creation feed my spirit. The feast of sensuous delight in the forms of wind caressing skin, shimmering colors flooding eyesight, the song of birds and of music, human touch, and infinitely more are glimpses of the Divine. They bring joy and strength. The mysteries of material reality unfolding in scientific exploration are yet another revelation of God. For the exquisite beauty and sacred pulse of this world I am profoundly grateful. They propel and sustain my work.

### **Language of Theology for the Sake of the World**

The reader will find herself or himself moving between the discourse of theology and of social theory. That interdisciplinary dialogue is essential to the task at hand, and produces deeper understanding of systemic injustice/evil and far more paths for dismantling it than does either theology or social theory alone.

Theology is the age-old effort to make sense of our many stories in light of God's presence and power in, with, and for this good creation. Theology is the quest to hold the stories of one's life and kin, of societies and cultures, of humankind, of otherkind, of the Earth, and of the cosmos in one breath with the Mystery that some call God.

While I employ theology and write as a person situated within Christianity, I do not write only for people who identify with it or with any religious tradition. I believe that all of Earth's great spiritual traditions are called upon to plumb their depths for the wisdom to meet the moral

challenges of our day. Moreover, the wisdom from any religious tradition is richer and fuller when placed in dialogue with others.

Yet, I am fully convinced that neither religious wisdom nor secular wisdom (found in the natural sciences, social sciences, mathematics, philosophy and other fields) *without the other* will enable movement toward a more just and sustainable future. For many centuries in the Western world, religious knowledge was recognized as the supreme and unassailable “truth.” With the enlightenment, scientific knowledge dethroned religion as the reigning form of valid knowledge. Neither, separated from the other, has proven adequate to meet the moral and technological challenges of humankind. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the ecological century, religious and secular wisdom will join forces for the sake of equitable and sustainable life on Earth.

This claim, while vital, harbors arrogance. As a person situated within these two forms of knowledge, how easy it is for me to attribute their inadequacy to their failure to work together. A closer look, informed by subaltern communities, cries out, “and what of our wisdom?” Is it not possible that religious wisdom and modern secular wisdom together remain sorely unequipped to meet the unprecedented challenges of ecocide and rampant economic injustice precisely because these bodies of knowledge have summarily ignored voices from the underside of history? Yes, meeting the moral challenges at hand will require religious inquiry and scientific inquiry to include and privilege the perspectives of communities heretofore marginalized by the epistemological arrogance of the Euro-Western world.<sup>14</sup>

I make no claim that Christianity holds moral wisdom superior to that of other religions or spiritual traditions. However it bears a unique burden. Christianity, inseparably wound up in the philosophical, ideological, and cosmological assumptions of modernity, has contributed immeasurably to the Earth crisis. Scholars and activists have analyzed those contributions endlessly. Doing so is essential; for only by recognizing them can we rethink and reconstruct. Re-hashing that story is not my project here. I assume the damage done by Christian beliefs and practices undergirding human dominion and oppression. I assume also that, having played this historic role, Christianity bears a tremendous responsibility to offer its resources to the pan-human task of rebuilding Earth’s health. Yet I write out of a sister assumption, a conviction that the damage wrought by Christianity is matched and surpassed by the potential within Christianity for helping to build new ways of being human marked by equity among people and mutually enhancing Earth-human relations.

This potential exists, I believe, in all of Earth’s great faith traditions. As a result, all bear a tremendous moral responsibility: if the people faithful to particular religious traditions do not uncover and draw upon the resources offered by their tradition, then those life-saving and life-sustaining resources remain dormant. Tremendous gifts of power for life and for the good are left untapped.

To those who suggest that religious wisdom ought stay separate from issues of public life in a secular religiously pluralistic society, I would say, there are many good reasons to hold this claim. However, each of those reasons has a counter, which, I believe, is stronger.<sup>15</sup> That is, the reasons *for* religion’s role in public life outweigh the reasons against.<sup>16</sup> That religion, as well as philosophy and the arts, ought play a role in deliberation of public issues depends in part upon

one's understanding of religion. If religion were understood primarily as doctrinal teaching about God, then it would be an inappropriate resource for use beyond the sphere of the particular religion considered. However that is a highly truncated understanding of religion, so much so as to be false. Religion, in a broader sense refers to the systems of beliefs, moral vision and norms, ethical behaviors, rituals, symbols, institutional arrangements, and historical legacy that "are premised on the understanding of human beings as other than or more than simply their purely social or physical identities"<sup>17</sup> and that link humans to the "matrix of mystery from which life arises and unfolds."<sup>18</sup> As such, religious wisdom is essential to debates about what will enable human and planetary flourishing. To exclude it from discussions of how to shape society would be to rip the heart and purpose out of the deliberations that shape how we will live together.

In reality however, the question of whether religion should play a role in matters of public morality is moot. Because so much of Earth's human population derives its moral grounding from religious grounds, religion is inherently at play in public morality. The question is not *whether* but *how*; by what criteria is religion's role appropriate and valid? I assume two. Not valid is any claim to know the will of God or God's truth with absolute certainty. And the aim of religiously-grounded public engagement is not to convert people, but rather to offer religious wisdom to the work of building justice, compassion, and ecological well-being.

A tragedy of human history is the all-too-frequent Christian falsification of its own truth claims in such a way that the hope and power they offer pertains only to people who accept certain theological propositions as true. That is, the church often has claimed that, if you do not believe certain truths then you are condemned.<sup>19</sup> However, *such exclusive truth claims and the necessity of believing them are not true to the heart of Christianity*. The heart of the tradition is this: the God who called this world into being loves it with a love beyond human imagining that will never die, is liberating this good creation, and is calling and sustaining human creatures to share in that life-saving work. This "heart of Christian faith" does not depend upon professing belief in any particular dogmas. Thus I draw upon Christianity, not to "Christianize" the social order, but rather because I expect it to yield life-saving wisdom and courage for facing the moral test now confronting us.

In that effort theology has three tools. One is critique. People of faith within the tradition are called to search out and name the ways in which Christian symbols, convictions, commitments, images of God, and practices have obscured or betrayed the good news of God's love for this creation and presence in, with, and for it/us. The second move is retrieval (or reclamation). We rediscover and reclaim the many seeds of Earth-care that inhabit the tradition but have been over-looked, suppressed, or domesticated throughout the centuries. Those seeds are in the Bible, in teachings throughout two millennia, in liturgical practice, in little heard voices, and more. Third is the move of reconstruction (or reinterpretation). We imaginatively re-construct core concepts, perceptions, teachings, images, practices, and commitments, allowing them to speak the saving Word and be the saving presence in the midst of today's stark realities.

These moves are not chronological but rather weave together, informing each other. They are integral to faith. They permeate this volume, for all three are necessary in bringing Christianity fully to the cause of ecological healing and justice-making.

I pretend no comprehensive response to the questions of moral complicity and moral power in the face of systemic evil raised in this book. That must be the work of multiple disciplines and areas of human inquiry and endeavor, for the roots of moral complacency in the face of systemic evil span many dimensions of human life. I probe just one small piece of a response, drawing upon tools of Christian ethics. May my efforts be useful to other people of goodwill who embrace that aim, whether they identify as religious or not.

### **We: The “Economically Privileged”... the “Over-Consuming Class”**

Clearly, not all human beings are the culprits in environmental racism and ecological injustice. Nor are we *all* responsible for the global wealth gap. Of just what “we” do I speak? At times in this book, “we” signifies humankind. At other times, “we” refers to those who have benefitted materially from the three waves of globalization that have shaped life on Earth in the last half millennia: the descendents of the tribes of Europe who colonized four continents and ravaged their peoples. More specifically, I speak of and as a subset of that circle: those whose wealth is gained through what people the world over now refer to as contemporary “empire” or “neo-colonialism” and who have, a least theoretically, the political agency to challenge it: White, United States citizens who also are relatively secure economically.<sup>20</sup> These are the “we” of whom I speak. I am one of them.

I recognize that the boundaries of this “we” are ambiguous. In some senses, all U.S. citizens participate in economic exploitation, yet many are exploited through inadequate wages, non-existent or sparse benefits, poor working conditions, wage theft, regressive taxation, conversion of affordable housing, exorbitant health care costs, and more. As a result, many live in poverty that may even have life-threatening consequences, or maintain a constant struggle to avoid poverty. These people are not my primary audience, but more important they are not the “we” of whom I speak. This is crucial. Ethical obligations are particular. God’s call to love neighbor as self takes divergent forms depending just who that “self” is. An ethic for people who systematically have been denied access to the necessities for life would begin with the right to have those goods, not with the call to relinquish them.<sup>21</sup>

I speak of, as, and to U.S. citizens whose economic situation is “privileged.” By this I connote people whose economic lives might be described in the following terms: Their income is not totally dependent upon wages or salaries. They have back-up resources (i.e. family support, possibility of buying a less expensive home, investments, etc.). A severe recession, such as that of 2009, probably would not place them in a position of having no home; inadequate food; or no access to healthcare, transportation, or other necessities. Perhaps more significant to this project, the economically privileged have enough economic resources that, without jeopardizing the basic ingredients of life with dignity for themselves and their dependents, they *could* make economic choices (pertaining to consumption, investment, employment, etc.) that would serve the cause of economic justice and ecological health, *even if those choices were to diminish their own financial bottom line*. They could choose, for example, to buy local, shun Wal-Mart or other companies with exploitative practices, invest in socially and ecologically responsible investment funds, purchase a hybrid car or commuter bike, boycott products even if they are less expensive than the alternative, take time away from income earning work and dedicate that time to efforts



for social change. I am not suggesting that the economically privileged are likely to make these choices; the point is that they *could* do so without endangering themselves or their dependents.

This category of “economically privileged” is porous. “Basic necessities for life with dignity,” “adequate food,” and “poverty,” for example, have many meanings. And the people fitting this description of economic privilege occupy widely-ranging economic strata. Nevertheless, the intent is to signify the large body of U.S. citizens whose economic status bears these characteristics. I will use “economically privileged” interchangeably with “over-consuming class.”

These terms and my emphasis on economic oppression may mislead. I am not using the designation, “over-consuming class” or “economically privileged” in the sense that reifies it as the primary form of oppression, more significant than racism or gender-based oppression. To the contrary, I see these three forms of oppression as inextricably intertwined, with none taking priority over the others as the taproot of oppressive relationships. Rather I emphasize economic violence (together with ecological violence) because at this point in history, I see it as the most unchallenged and unrecognized form of systemic oppression.

The claim that “economic exploitation is woven into our lives” may seem odd to readers not yet acquainted with it. The term does not refer primarily to direct acts of exploitation. It may well be that I do not underpay my employees, own or manage a sweat shop, engage in “wage theft,” relocate my company to skirt environmental standards or labor protection laws, etc. Nevertheless my life benefits materially from these and other exploitative practices or the policies and principles that enable them. These practices, policies, and principles are systemic and they are historical. (Herein “systemic” and “structural” are used interchangeably.)

By “structured” or “systemic” I mean that structures of society (be they political, economic, cultural, military, or other) are arranged in ways that enable some people to have vastly more access than other people to material goods and other resources, tools for acquiring them, and power for determining the terms of life in common. Said differently, institutional arrangements, economic theories, marketing practices, tax laws, international trade agreements, mortgage and other finance practices, and other economic processes and policies favor people with money over people without. The same structures that privilege people with more wealth deprive many people who have none. They enable excessive consumption by some *at the cost of* impoverishing others and Earth. That these structures and patterns have developed historically is crucial; it means that human agency, having constructed them, also can change them. The stories woven throughout the book illustrate more fully how the structured and historic nature of oppression plays out in life.

The vital points are two: 1) Social systems or structures are created by people over time. What is constructed by human decisions and actions is subject to human agency. That is, *it can be changed or dismantled by other decisions and actions*. 2) Dismantling systemic oppression or systemic evil *requires recognizing it as systemic*, rather than merely a function of individuals. These may be two of this book’s most important points.

## **A Map of the Inquiry**

Meeting the moral and practical challenge of ecological sustainability wed to social justice requires exposing and countering the structural violence that is woven into the fabric of our lives. What shifts in how morality and ethics are practiced will cultivate moral-spiritual power for that work and for forging alternatives more consistent with God's love for this world? A response begins by noting in understandings of morality and Christian ethics as they have developed in North America, fault lines that truncate the moral-spiritual power for renouncing structural violence. These fault lines include inadequate attention to the structural nature of sin, to moral vision, and to the economic and ecological dimensions of love which is the central Christian moral norm.<sup>22</sup> This book elaborates upon these three problems, but its main focus is to counter them with corresponding shifts in morality and ethical method. Consider now a brief sketch of what is to unfold in the book.

### Life Stories

People's lives express the complexity and intimacy of the connections between our wealth on the one hand and others' impoverishment and Earth's devastation on the other. Stories or vignettes from people's lives weave throughout this book, helping to explain both the damage wrought by our consumptive ways of life and viable alternatives. While many of the stories portray people I have known, others engage constructed "characters" and situations. Where the stories are written in the first person, that person often is not actually I, but rather is a constructed "I."

*As you encounter each "life story," it is crucial to bear in mind that each is revisited later in the chapter or in a subsequent chapter. These second "episodes" or "counter narratives" illustrate how the injustice seen in the first can be undone, and more just and sustainable alternatives developed. In the second episodes we return to the people in the stories, and take steps with them to resist structural violence and to build alternatives. The reader will encounter people and their undertakings actively engaged in changing policies and practices of life on four levels: the individual or household, corporate, other institutions, and government.*

### The Moral Crisis

Chapter Two introduces the two-fold moral crisis addressed in this book: the ways in which our lives perpetuate ecological devastation and economic injustice. It explores the inseparability of economic and ecological violence, and views links connecting our excessive consumption to others' severe poverty and Earth's devastation. Finally, this chapter introduces four over-arching principles for the life-giving alternatives possible if human communities generate moral-spiritual power to imagine and adopt them.

### Structural Sin: Social and Ecological

Chapter Three explores structural injustice, complicity with it, and moral-spiritual power for challenging it through theological lenses. It unearths theological problems presented by

economic and ecological injustice and then translates structural injustice into the two theological concepts most aligned with it: structural sin and structural evil. Christian traditions hold that freedom from bondage to sin begins with confession and repentance but where sin is not acknowledged, it cannot be confessed. I assert, therefore, the necessity in ethics and morality of honing skills in *seeing* structural sin, especially where it masquerades as good. Examining structural injustice as structural evil divulges its propensity to hide and its devious means of doing so. Finally, the insights into structural sin and evil dialogue with a body of social theory aptly suited for demystifying structural injustice: structural violence theory.

### Critical Mystical Vision

Chapter Four takes up the challenge to “see” presented in the previous chapter. We cannot change what we do not see. Therein lies the grave danger in the “hiddenness of evil.” This chapter identifies specific factors contributing to moral oblivion.

The focus of Chapter Five is enabling moral vision. It introduces the idea of “critical mystical vision,” and proposes that it entails a profound shift in moral consciousness. The shift is to a less anthropocentric and a less privatized sense of morality. This sense of morality sees the human species as a part of rather than outside of Earth’s web of life, and accounts for the moral impact of our *collective* actions, not only our individual ones. Furthermore, this moral consciousness seeks to prioritize perceptions of reality as expressed by those on the underside of power and privilege including voices of the Earth, reversing history’s pervasive allegiance to the perceptions of the winners.

The sixth chapter explores yet another key to moral vision: the mystical dimension of critical mystical vision. This chapter faces head-on the paralyzing forces of hopelessness and denial that so easily thwart the desire to confront social injustice and work for a more just and ecologically healthy world. We examine seeds of hope and moral vision for contemporary life that are found in ancient theological claims.

### Love as an Economic and Ecological Vocation

In Christian traditions, “vocation” refers to a calling, something to which a person or group is called by God. (The word comes from the Latin, *vocare*, meaning, “to call out.”) Neighbor-love is understood as a vocation. Humans are called by God to love neighbor as self. This is the central moral norm of Christian life.

If sin is structural as well as individual, then love, the force that redeems from sin, must also have both social structural and individual relevance. Neighbor-love, however, commonly is seen as pertaining to interpersonal relationships alone. That is, love is a matter of private or individual life. Little attention is paid to the structural dimensions of neighbor-love, and especially the economic and ecological dimensions. This inattention invites a privatized sense of morality. Far too readily, deep and heartfelt concern about poverty and hunger, for example, is channeled primarily into the private or interpersonal arenas of charitable service and giving, while efforts to

challenge the systemic causes of poverty drift to the wayside.

For people wrapped up in the structural sins of ecological and economic exploitation, neighbor-love becomes an “economic-ecological vocation.” These are the concerns of Chapters Seven and Eight. Chapter Seven explores the mystery and reality of neighbor-love as a biblical and theological norm. Chapter Eight examines how these characteristics of neighbor-love play out in our context of complicity with economic and ecological injustice. Along the way it develops the four overall principles for a moral economy introduced in Chapter Two.

### A Moral Framework for Justice-Making Earth-Keeping Life

Chapter Nine develops a moral framework for love as an economic and ecological vocation. The framework brings together and summarizes the approach to ethical inquiry used and theorized throughout the book. This chapter specifies goals for realizing the principles developed in Chapter Eight. In the process we unfold a theology and ethic of neighbor-love for the “uncreators.”

Chapter Ten illustrates a portion of that framework in utterly practical terms. It focuses on one of the proposed goals that often seems impossible, and illustrates policies and practices already underway that aim at reaching it. It is the goal of reducing the power of global corporations relative to citizen power.

### Throughout the Chapters

A note about my subject positions in this text is in order. As has become common in much theological and social theoretical work, I write intentionally from a particular social location. That is, I speak as the particular I and we discussed earlier in this chapter. I speak not only *from* that position but *about* it and *to* it. However, the notion of a situated subject position, as I use it, has another wrinkle. The position is not only social but also ecological.<sup>23</sup> I assume that our locations in eco-systems shape us. I must admit, I am only beginning to grapple with the bemusing implications of this assumption. These factors of location invite a bit of hopping around between first and third person discourse, with an occasionally second person address – to you, the reader – tossed in. May your patience hold, and may my indicators of where “I” am in the text be adequate. My location within a Lutheran form of Christianity will become evident, as will my conviction that to be true to a religious tradition one must be critical of it.

The language shifts between a more and a less academic voice. This may be uncomfortable for people who prefer one or the other, and especially vexing for readers who tend to either resent or dismiss one of the two. I believe, however, that the purpose justifies the problems. Academic work at its best, I believe, is translated into easily accessible language. Yet as Patricia Hill Collins notes, academic discourses have not only their limitations but also their strengths and “in some cases express ideas not easily translatable into everyday speech....”<sup>24</sup> Where important ideas are more clearly expressed in academic language, I invoke it.

Unlikely conversation partners frequent these pages. That is intentional. Injustice is known most fully and described most clearly by those who suffer from it. Ethics, therefore, is to draw upon the wisdom, knowledge, and experience of people and places on the underside of power and privilege. Moreover, the paths toward a more just and sustainable future are often best known by people already forging those paths. Ethics, thus, must draw upon activists engaged in the issues at hand. I have tried to put in conversation activists, scholars, activist/scholars, people whose lives are threatened or have been taken by ecological and economic violence, ancient voices and contemporary. Fully convinced that the problems faced herein will be solved only if varied fields of human endeavor bring their wisdom into constructive exchange, the reader will encounter in these pages the theories and methods not only of Christian ethics, but also other fields of the theological studies, political theory, economics, critical race theory, feminist theory, and the natural sciences.

This book is a constructive work in Christian ethics in the context of complicity with structural evil, especially as it appears in ways of living that threaten ecological well-being and enable a few to thrive at the expense of death or degradation for many. The inquiry seeks to take seriously both the depth of that evil, and the healing, liberating, life transforming power of love, especially as revealed by the God whom Jesus loved. How, I ask, are we to do ethics and live morally as a people called to love yet deeply engaged in systemic evil that masquerades as normal, natural, inevitable, or even God's will?

## **Christian Ethics**

The terms *morality* and *ethics* commonly are used interchangeably. In the discipline of ethics and in this volume, they are not. *Morality* refers to the lived dimension of life pertaining to doing and being – for individuals and groups (small and large) – in ways that are good, right, and fitting. *Ethics*, on the other hand, is the “second order discourse” reflecting on that dimension of life; ethics is disciplined inquiry into or study of morality. This book is, in the first place, about morality, about living a moral life for people whose everyday ways of life have decidedly immoral consequences on others and on the Earth.

Secondarily this book is about ethics. Within Christianity, Christian ethics is the theological discipline charged with enabling people to draw upon their faith heritage to meet the moral challenges of each particular time and place in a way that reflects the love of God for all of creation. The aim of Christian ethics is, in the words of Christian ethicist Miguel De La Torre, to enable “relationships where all people can live full abundant lives, able to become all that God has called them to be,”<sup>25</sup> to “have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). By definition, then, ethics seeks to dismantle dehumanizing and destructive forces such as racism, colonialism, classism, sexism, and ecological degradation, and seeks to cultivate conditions that enable right relationships within Earth's web of life and with God.

However, Christian ethics in the North Atlantic world has not significantly enabled church or broader society to craft ways of life that counter both the ecological destruction and the economic violence that mark our day. The problem in Christian ethics has one root in fundamental presuppositions about neighbor-love as a biblical and theological norm, about sin,

and about moral vision. Equally significant, ethical norms and processes in any society are established by dominant sectors to reflect their sense of morality and to uphold the power arrangements that maintain their dominance. Thus, the established moral code rationalizes itself and thus cannot assess itself. That is, socially constructed moral values and norms perpetuate, through moral sanctioning, a prevailing order that might be considered unjust according to another moral vision. As De La Torre points out, conscience, and even interpretations of “what Jesus would do,” are socially constructed within this moral code and therefore are ill-equipped to counter it. The focus of ethics becomes determining what is ethical according to the prevailing moral code, rather than challenging the rightness of that moral framework itself.<sup>26</sup> Christian ethics, therefore, must reveal the presupposed assumptions regarding what is morally good that sanction “the way things are.” My efforts to counter these inadequacies in ethics unfold in this book.

Here, I summarize four ways of understanding Christian ethics that shape this book. The four are consistent, yet each emphasizes a different dimension of ethics. According to one understanding, Christian Ethics is the disciplined art of coming to know ever more fully the mystery that is God and the realities of life on Earth, and holding these two together, so that we may shape ways of living consistent with and empowered by God being with, in, among, and for creation. “Knowing” here refers not merely to “knowledge of,” but to “being in relationship with.” Where vision and knowledge of God and of life’s realities (what is going on and the historical roots and consequences of what is going on) are obscured or distorted, a task of Christian Ethics is *to know and see differently*, so that we might *live differently*.

In another and complementary sense, the “meaning of ethics” is, as Paul Tillich writes, “to express the ways in which love embodies itself and life is maintained and saved.”<sup>27</sup> The boundless implications of ethics thus understood depend upon the meaning of “love” as a biblical and theological norm. Herein lies the import of our effort to see love as inherently justice-making and Earth-honoring, and as an ecological-economic vocation.

Third, Christian ethics may be seen as disciplined inquiry into morality. It is the art-science bringing self-consciousness, method, critical vision, and faith to the tasks of: 1) discerning what is good and right for any given situation and context, 2) finding the moral-spiritual power to act on that discernment, and 3) discovering what forms individuals and society toward and away from the good.

Finally, Christian Ethics is the theological art-science enabling Christian communities to draw critically upon their traditions and read “the signs of the times,” in order to shape ways of living consistent with faith in the God whom Jesus loved. That God is revealed in Jesus Christ and through the Spirit and may be revealed in Scripture and in God’s first book of revelation, the creation itself. Critical mystical vision is key to “reading the signs of the times” in ways that disclose and counter structural injustice. In all four of these understandings, the overall question of Christian ethics becomes: “How are we to perceive our world, and how are we to live in it *because of God’s boundless love for creation and presence with and in it*.”

These varied yet complementary ways of understanding Christian ethics signal the great challenge inherent in Christian ethical inquiry. It is to perceive and “tell the truth” about the

human capacity to render and rationalize brutality while *never subordinating that reality to the bigger one: the goodness, beauty, joy, and laughter in life and the inherent goodness of being created in the image of God*. To “tell the truth” about the former without also celebrating the latter, in the long run, is to harbor a lie.

Clearly, my approach to ethics assumes an overlap of the mystical and the moral aspects of life. That is, the human longing for the sacred relates in some vital ways to the longing for more compassionate, just, and Earth-honoring ways of being human. That connection is central to a moral framework capable of meeting the challenge of systemic evil in our day.

The moral framework emerging herein has four fundamental markers. The first is its focus on moral agency. The inadequacies in ethical method addressed in this work contribute to (and, to a certain extent, derive from) a basic flaw in Christian ethics. It is the reduction of ethics to questions of moral deliberation and formation, largely bypassing questions of moral agency. The “deliberative dimension” of ethics refers to processes of moral decision-making, responding to the question of “what are we to do and be?” “Moral agency” on the other hand, refers to moral-spiritual power to “do and be” what we discern we ought. Ethics as response to the question of “what we are to do and be” is dangerously inadequate, especially in the contemporary context, because far too readily we *do* know what we ought to do in response to economic and ecological violence, but fail to find the moral agency to act on that knowledge. Ethics in the context of structural sin must go beyond moral deliberation and formation; ethics must be concerned with the moral agency to move toward more equitable, compassionate, and sustainable social orders. The basic moves in ethics and morality developed herein foster moral agency.

The second central marker is the de-privatization of sin, love, morality, and spirituality in constructions of Christian faith and ethics. Ethics for the uncreators, as proposed in this book, reveals the dangers of privatization and argues for a more structural sense of sin and of love, and more relational and collective notions of moral being and doing. The next marker is the commitment to hold the quest for social justice and the quest for ecological sustainability as inseparable. Finally, the proposed ethical framework centers in critical mystical vision -- enhanced capacity to see “what is,” “what could be,” and God’s presence within creation working toward the latter.

The book, then, constructs Earth-honoring justice-seeking Christian ethics. The *how* of ethical reflection determines its outcome, and thereby may have life and death consequences. For this reason, my intent is to propose and employ substantive shifts in *how* ethics is done in response to the context of structural evil. I propose and employ an approach to morality and ethics that could help communities of faith and other concerned people of the Global North respond morally to the reality of our historic and contemporary participation in structural evil, especially as it is manifest in economic and ecological violence.

This effort responds constructively to calls issued by the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to engage in transforming the reigning paradigm of economic globalization because of its dire impacts on the world’s impoverished people and its ecosystems. “The churches and the ecumenical family [are] called to move beyond critique of neo-liberal globalization to stating how God’s grace can

transform this paradigm. The call [is] for an ecumenical vision of life in just and loving relationships, through a search for alternatives to the present economic structure,” declares the World Council of churches in its “Alternative Globalization Addressing Peoples and Earth (AGAPE).”<sup>28</sup>

Finally, this work is drawn out of me by the Spirit. The ELCA, in its rituals of baptism and confirmation, makes an utterly astounding (but often not recognized as such) affirmation. The people gathered in worship affirm that, at baptism, God makes a covenant with the baptized person that she or he *will* “strive for justice and peace in all the earth.” The Spirit is breathed into us, and into all of creation, as moral-spiritual power for this lifework.

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<sup>1</sup> “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence,” speech delivered on April 4, 1967 at Riverside Church in New York City.

<sup>2</sup> Petra Kelly (1947-1992) was a founder of the Green Party in Germany.

<sup>3</sup> One project alone, for example, would “directly affect 9000 people and displace 3500 people from their habitat in 40 villages.” William Stanley, “Land does not belong to us – we belong to the land: Mining in Orissa, India,” *Echos* 21 (2002), a publication of the Lutheran World Federation.

<sup>4</sup> See book’s webpage.

<sup>5</sup> Amy Sinden, “Climate Change and Human Rights,” *Journal of Land, Resources and Environmental Law* 27, 255 (2007).

<sup>6</sup> Hope Yen, “Census Shows 1 in 2 people are poor or low-income” *Associated Press*, December 15, 2011. <http://finance.yahoo.com/news/census-shows-1-2-people-103940568.html>. See also [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)

<sup>7</sup> Cornel West, luncheon presentation at Queen Anne United Methodist Church, Seattle, April, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> For analysis of the racial economic divide in the U.S., see annual *State of the Dream* report by United for a Fair Economy. [www.faireconomy.org](http://www.faireconomy.org).

<sup>9</sup> “The median wealth of white households is 20 times that of black households and 18 times that of Hispanic households, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of newly available government data from 2009. Pew Research Center, “Wealth Gaps Rise to Record Highs Between Whites, Blacks and Hispanics,” Washington, D.C., 2011, 1.

<sup>10</sup> “Ecocide” was used in theology as early as 1993 by Elizabeth Johnson in *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Hadewijch of Brabant, 13<sup>th</sup> century mystic and poet. Columba Hart, ed. *The Complete Works of Hadewijch*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1980).

<sup>12</sup> “Personal” does not mean “private.”

<sup>13</sup> Romans 8:38-9.

<sup>14</sup> George Zachariah, *Alternatives Unincorporated: Earth Ethics from the Grassroots* (London: Equinox Publishing, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Roger Gottlieb in *A Greener Faith: religious environmentalism and our planet's future*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) summarizes five prominent cogent arguments against religion in public life, and then counters them.

<sup>16</sup> The separation of church and state does not mean a separation of religion and public life.

<sup>17</sup> Roger Gottlieb, *This Sacred Earth: religion, nature, environment*, (New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> Mary Evelyn Tucker, lecture delivered at “Renewing Hope: Pathways of Religious Environmentalism” conference at Yale, 2008.

<sup>19</sup> What those “truth claims” are has varied depending upon the bent of any particular Christian group. The examples are endless: “Jesus is the son of God.” “Jesus is my Lord and Savior.” “Jesus was born of a virgin.” “The world was created in seven days.”

<sup>20</sup> Clearly, “over-consumers” are not limited to the U.S.; they also populate all continents. However the U.S. and U.S.-based corporations have been disproportionately powerful in structuring the currently prevailing form of world economy and its “free” trade regimes that privilege the wealthier nations.

<sup>21</sup> Paraphrase of a statement by womanist Christian ethicist and clergyperson, Melanie Harris.

<sup>22</sup> They are not the only disciplinary factors that have impeded critical moral vision. Another is the location of the



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discipline's main voices (until the emergence of womanist, feminist, and other liberationist ethics) on the "winning side" of white supremacy, male supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism's ascendance.

<sup>23</sup> As far as I know, the term "ecological location" was coined by Ecological Ethicist, Dan Spencer.

<sup>24</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), xx-xxi.

<sup>25</sup> Miguel De La Torre, *Doing Ethics from the Margins* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 6.

<sup>26</sup> De La Torre, *Doing Ethics*.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Tillich and James Luther Adams, *The Protestant Era*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

<sup>28</sup> Justice, Peace, and Creation Team of the WCC, "Alternative Globalization Addressing Peoples and Earth (AGAPE)" (Geneva: WCC, 2005), foreword.