

Reflection on 'Integral Ecology' in response to Cardinal Peter Turkson

Trócaire Annual Lecture, March 5th 2015

Dr Lorna Gold, Head of Policy and Advocacy, Trócaire

I would like to thank Cardinal Turkson for his thought provoking talk. The talk raises some very profound issues which will take some time to reflect on, but I wanted to share some brief reflections.

Three points struck me in particular in relation to Trócaire's work: the universality of ecology; the importance of integration and synthesis; and the need for a renewal of interiority.

Ecology as a universal issue

The first point that I take away from this talk is that *integral ecology should interest all of us, it is a universal concern*. Put simply: God has given us one home – planet earth, and we share a responsibility to care for it. If my house is burning, I will do something to save it! We need to expand our horizon of care to embrace the earth as our common home. This is both a basic truth and an enormous challenge.

For me, a personal wake-up call in this regard came last year when I was researching climate change for Trócaire. I realised a simple fact which really shocked me: as a planet and species we have a finite 'budget' of carbon dioxide we can put into the atmosphere if we want to stay within 'safe' ecological limits. If we continue to use this up at current rates, we will have used it up completely by 2035. This finite 'carbon budget' is being used up so unevenly – and for the most part unwittingly squandered. There is a massive inequality between who is using that budget up. My emissions here in Ireland are around 88 times those of the average Ethiopian. It has completely changed my own awareness of my own environmental impact and the choices I make.

Trócaire's work on climate justice in recent years reflects the essence of this universal concern. In fact, we have faced some criticism for taking on what is commonly seen as an 'environmental issue.' But we have realised that *the environmental crisis we are witnessing is a presenting symptom*. It shows how the ecological crisis is already impacting on their lives and amplifying the threats they already face in terms of food security and livelihoods. The ecological crisis is hitting the poorest first and hardest. The reality is that whilst the problem might present as an environmental one – the underlying issues are about justice. The causes and solutions to this crisis are not so much environmental as social, educational, economic, political, moral – in other words, they require an integral, systemic approach – and this is what we push for through our work.

Integration and synthesis

The second point I take away from this talk is the urgent need for synthesis and integration of perspectives in tackling problems which are both environmental and human. In other words, *we need to embrace the reality of relationality, being one human family, living on this one planet and make that the measure of our decisions*.

This can be difficult to get your head round but has very real consequences. The absence of synthesis today is very evident. It results in incoherence in policies at every level. You can see this when you go to the UN. It is remarkable to witness the sheer numbers and industriousness of NGOs, policy makers, officials... all fighting for very worthy goals. "I'm for disability" "I'm for indigenous peoples" "I'm for small island states" "I'm for people living in extreme poverty"... and so on. Yet everyone is so caught up in fighting their own corner, pushing for their piece of the puzzle to be prioritised, virtually no-one is thinking about the sum of the parts, the systemic questions. It is just too complicated, the power interests are too great. The result is ineffective action, not seeing the wood for the trees.

Moving beyond this siloed, partial way of thinking is a profound intellectual, practical and political practical challenge. Integral ecology, as Cardinal Turkson has outlined, requires a transition to think in the round – about the multi-dimensional nature of problems, not just theoretically, but in reality. But also requires a shift in how we think

in terms of scale - to think as a species, as one planet, in terms of our common future. Yes, individual interests, national identities and concerns matter – but only if we have a world to live in. Only if we can agree a just and sustainable use of resources which enables us to live in peace together.

Á

Perhaps most urgently, it requires a rethinking of our *hierarchy of public values* which currently put financial gain and economic growth above ecology – consumption above conservation, private gain above the universal destination of goods. We still define progress in terms of national and global economic growth, even when that growth is predicated on the destruction of the planet we call home. There is something seriously wrong in our accounting system! Rethinking this in a way that reduces excessive, wasteful consumption but still allows those living in poverty to achieve a decent standard of living is the major challenge today.

Á

Redistributive justice is also an ecological issue.

By its nature, developing an integral ecology is a collective exercise. It is not possible for one person or institution to embody the range of perspectives and expertise required from an integral theory and ecology approach. This means breaking down the intellectual and political silos and finding a way to achieve new insights through shared knowledge. It requires a whole different skill set and education system to the current one which prioritises technical expertise, competition and intellectual propriety. It requires an ability to dialogue, to share perspectives, to listen, to try to engage and understand the others perspective and appreciate what is good about it. *It requires an ability to see that none of us has the whole truth, but many of us have partial truths.*

Á

The work that Trócaire is doing here on campus, together with St.Patrick's College and the University is one small example of this kind of multi-faceted dialogue in action. Together we are developing a dialogue which is bringing together many perspectives together – from science, social science, humanities, practitioners and policy makers to understand what each can contribute to addressing the issue of climate justice. The dialogue will result in a two day event in June – but the journey is as important as the final event! It is an exciting journey which involves a lot of listening. You start with a common vision and objective – but need to work hard to find a common language.

The renewal of interiority

The final point which I take away is really the first one – the kind of spiritual and cultural renewal we need to make the shift to embracing the reality of ‘one earth’ and ‘one family’. The transition to an integral ecology, which reflects care for creation and the poor, can only be achieved through a change of heart – a renewal of interiority. As Cardinal Turkson put it so beautifully:

“When Saint Francis gazed upon the heavens, when he surveyed the wonder and beauty of the animals, he did not respond to them with the abstract formulae of science or the utilitarian eye of the economist. His response was one of awe, wonder and fraternity.”

‘We will care for what we cherish and revere’. The culture we are living in, based on the values of modernity, currently places little value on interiority. What has most value is what is external, visible, tangible – exteriority. Yet there is a dawning that this inner world is essential to bringing about change and achieving human happiness. Think of the massive growth in the movement towards mindfulness and simplicity. Rather than focusing on quick technical fixes, the key questions for society has to be ‘What is the interior world, the thought systems, the values that sustain or undermine an integral ecology?’ Could we not say that a ‘communitarian’ spirituality, which is attune to dialogue and mutual understanding, in this regard, is actually a critical public good?

As Pope Francis points to, the horizon of hope needs to open up and be underpinned by a new interiority. In fact, the flourishing of a new culture which cherishes the environment, *recognises the beauty and value of less* is a profound paradox for today’s world. It is a very hard sell for those who are bought into the dominant culture, but not for those who have made the Gospel of love and justice the motivating force for their life!