

THE ENERGY QUESTION: THE THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

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To begin with, it is important that we neither overestimate nor underestimate the importance of theology for dealing with the energy question. Theology will not tell us how much petroleum there is in the Baltimore Canyon or the Northwestern States. For that we need empirical data. But all the data in the world will not tell us what are the good and equitable uses of that petroleum or even whether it is ethically best to mount the effort to get it out of the ground.

The premise upon which all that follows is based is that the world-wide energy emergency is real. It is not a fake. It is not something created by the bungling of government nor the scheming of corporations. Therefore it is something we ignore at our peril.

Every major decision about energy is a decision about both values and facts. That is why the current debates are so hard to resolve. Our world has too little experience in thinking through decisions where (1) every value is embedded in a nest of intricate, controversial facts, and (2) every fact has relevance only in relation to conflicting interests and values.

Our world likes to separate facts and values. There is a difference between them, important to understand, but they won't stay separated. The effort to keep them apart leads to futility.

Suppose, for example, one starts with values. One might read thousands of pages from the great traditions of religion and ethics without coming upon any discussion of energy--that is, energy as a marketable commodity that heats homes, drives engines, and multiplies the productivity of soil and human muscles. The Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, the writings of Lao-tse and the Buddha, the books of Plato and Kant say nothing about petroleum reserves or nuclear reactors. A practical policy depends upon data, known or estimated, about fuel reserves and expectations for new sources of energy.

But suppose one starts with facts. No collection of data tells a society how to divide its resources among its members, whether to limit its immediate desires for the sake of people outside its borders or generations yet to be born, what kinds of consumption really make for better life. Information alone does not dictate policy. Judgments about policy depend upon purposes and values.

Energy is one of many cases in which the human race, with its new technological abilities, must combine ethical sensitivity with technical competence if it is to survive with a life worth living. The following paragraphs will take up eight questions, all related to energy and all requiring a sensitivity to human values.

1. How important is energy? The American way of life is built on energy in great abundance. Not everything in that American way of life is worth preserving. How important is the abundance of energy?

Most of the human race lived before the use of steam engines, internal combustion engines, and electricity. Even today the majority of the world's homes--one estimate is two-thirds--are not wired for electricity. There could be a glory in life before the invention of energy-consuming technologies. Think of Dante and Shakespeare, of Leonardo and Rembrandt, of Bach and Mozart, to mention only the Western tradition. Think of most of the prophets, saints, and sages of the world religions. Creative and noble life does not require high consumption of fossil fuels.

But most of our world puts a great value on plentiful energy. Energy-consuming machines do much of the drudgery once done by the lower classes in a hierarchical society; much of what we value in democracy depends on that release from drudgery. Energy-consuming technologies, although they destroy some human lives, have reduced infant mortality and enhanced health and life-expectancy for many populations. Familiar comforts and conveniences of most Americans depend on high consumption of energy. By this time the uses of energy have been so built into social structures that people in many an American city could not survive any radical disruption of energy supplies.

Obviously, energy is important for many human values. But in an age when it has become obvious that (1) the world's four billion people cannot possibly consume energy on the scale familiar to the wealthiest societies and (2) the wealthiest societies cannot maintain their ways undisturbed, it is important to rethink the importance of energy. At a minimum, we can recognize that quality of life is not directly proportionate to quantity of energy consumed. We, as individuals and as a society, must decide what that relationship is. Our decision will depend upon our values.

2. How shall we value independence? Something frightening happened between 1945, when the United States led the world in petroleum exports, and the present, when our economy and personal habits are radically dependent on imports of petroleum. The costs of dependence include inflation, insecurity, and painful perplexities about foreign policy.

This country is discovering the meaning of the dependence which is an old story to many countries. Often they are dependent on caprices of our stock and commodity markets, our monetary policy, our political and military decisions. To find ourselves dependent on caprices of far-away political and religious leaders can be an educational experience. It conceivably might lead us to a more responsible use of power.

But it also requires us to ask ethical questions. Is an authentic interdependence possible? If not, or until it is, what is the relation between dependence and independence? How dangerous is dependence to the values we most cherish? What changes in our way of life are we willing to make for the sake of independence?

3. How do we relate moral loyalties and self-interest? In the brave words of Senator Moynihan, "American foreign policy is not for sale--not 1 million barrels of oil a day nor 100 barrels will buy the honor of this republic." But certainly our relations with the former Shah of Iran, with Saudi Arabia, with neighboring Mexico have been influenced, subtly or drastically, by oil. We long ago discovered that it was easier to denounce violations of human rights by some nations than by others. The energy problem increases the tension between our moral posture and our self-interest. We readily see how France and Japan, industrial nations that must import almost all their coal and oil, walk delicately through international controversies. Will we, as our dependence becomes more critical, increasingly fit our loyalties to

our interests?

4. How do our interests affect recognition of facts? Why was the United States so slow in waking up to the energy problem? Why did 77 percent of the public as late as 1979 believe that the energy crisis was a fake?

Part of the answer is that our interests and values (good and bad) determine much of our ability to recognize facts. The Bible tells of people who, because of hardness of heart, cannot see (Isaiah 6:9, Mark 8:17-18). In what ways do our interests and our values prevent us from recognizing what is going on in the world? And what can we do about our misperceptions?

5. What is just distribution of scarce energy? Energy shortages mean that some people hurt. How does a nation manage scarcity? The United States usually relies on the market. The moral value inherent in the market is freedom. Nobody tells individuals what they can buy. They decide for themselves, within their means. This country, which puts a high value on freedom and distrusts bureaucracy, likes the market.

But in wartime the nation rations scarce commodities. It qualifies freedom for the sake of some measure of equality. At present, Congress has authorized stand-by plans for rationing gasoline. Some elements of price controls modify the energy market. And federal and state governments have taken steps so that poor people will not freeze.

Justice includes elements of freedom and equality. How shall a nation seek justice during an energy crunch? Even more difficult, how does a world seek justice? The energy shortage has meant for some countries an absolute drop in already low living standards. The "most energy-rich nation in the world," as President Carter described the United States, imports oil at the expense of energy-poor nations. Is just distribution conceivable or possible internationally?

6. How shall we assess risks? We can produce more energy if we accept some risks. Coal is dangerous--to miners, to people who breathe polluted air, to the climate. Nuclear energy, the world increasingly realizes, is dangerous. What is "acceptable risk," to use the current jargon?

A study of the Council on Scientific Affairs of the American Medical Association concluded that, on the record thus far, "a coal-fired power plant each year results in about 400 times more deaths than does an equivalent nuclear-powered station" (Journal of the American Medical Association, November 10, 1978). Our society has been amazingly indifferent to the hazards of coal. But do these figures mean that we should rush from coal to nuclear energy? No, because a single major accident--of the type that Three Mile Island threatened to be--could drastically change the figures.

The science of risk assessment is young. It has a great future. But however sophisticated it becomes, persons and societies must still decide what risks they will accept for what benefits. And that is a question of values.

7. What God do we serve? This question has to do with the dynamics of a person and of a culture, with what is regarded sacred. The distinguished economist, Robert Heilbroner, has written an important book called An Inquiry Into the Human Prospect. In the closing pages of that book, he looks for the symbolic figure who has given the modern age its "driving energy." His choice is an interesting one: not

Moses, not Jesus, but Prometheus.

Prometheus was the Titan of Greek myth, the divine being who out of love stole fire from Zeus and made it a gift to humanity. Prometheus was the daring innovator, who taught the human race numbers, language, invention, all the human arts. Zeus in his jealousy ordered Prometheus chained to a rock on Mount Caucasus in a lonely place where no human being ever came. Day after day throughout centuries a vulture gnawed at his liver, which grew back every night. Prometheus could have gained his freedom by acquiescing in the will of Zeus, but he chose to resist in courage and defiance.

Ancient Athens celebrated the spirit of Prometheus in the tragedy of Aeschylus. Shelley made Prometheus the symbol of courageous and loving hope: "to hope till Hope creates from its own wreck the thing it contemplates; neither to change, nor falter, nor repent; this, like thy glory, Titan, is to be good, great and joyous, beautiful and free."

That's wonderful. But what of Prometheus today? Heilbroner says we need to look elsewhere for a symbol for this age. And he turns to another Greek Titan, Atlas, who was condemned to carry the sky on his head and hands. For Atlas there are no exciting adventures, no glamorous achievements. He must do his duty, wearily enduring.

Heilbroner's conclusion is that "the spirit of conquest and aspiration will not provide the inspiration" we now need. "It is the example of Atlas, resolutely bearing his burden, that provides the strength we seek."

What shall we make of that? In the perilous days ahead we can welcome any help from the traditions of courage and endurance. We in the church are likely to notice that both Prometheus and Atlas were suffering servants. And we will remember another suffering servant in our history. Isaiah speaks of him thus: "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. . . . He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53:4-5).

The Christian church has always believed that in some profound way that suffering servant was and is Jesus Christ, who lived a human life among us, who shared the pain of the poor, who "suffered under Pontius Pilate," who "was crucified, dead, and buried," who "rose from the grave and ascended into heaven," who "shall come to judge the quick and the dead." And it is our belief that it is not in spite of his suffering that he is Lord. No. Because of and in his suffering he is the Lamb upon the throne.

What difference does it make to believe in this Christ as Lord? Specifically, how does it affect us as we face the energy crisis? First, Jesus, repeating a saying from Deuteronomy, teaches us: "Man does not live by bread alone." Yet it was Jesus who, at the Last Supper, broke bread with his disciples. It was Jesus whom the Disciples, after the resurrection, recognized "in the breaking of the bread." Faith in Christ is no dreary materialism that says bread can satisfy the human spirit, nor is it a lofty idealism that thinks bread unimportant. We can say the same of energy. Humanity does not live by energy alone, yet energy is utterly important to our existence. In faith we can rightly seek energy for ourselves and God's people around the world, without slipping into the illusion that human fulfillment is proportional to the energy we consume.

Second, Jesus has a concern for human justice. He is not the titanic hero who helps humanity against the angry gods; he comes among us incarnating God's love, preaching "good news to the poor," "release to the captives," and liberty to "those who are oppressed." In his name we can with good conscience encourage human

ingenuity in the search for energy, not so that our privileges may remain secure but so that all humanity can find relief from oppressive poverty.

Third, Jesus shows us the possibility of joy in living. Prometheus and Atlas in their tragic grandeur never had fun. We cannot imagine them turning water to wine at a wedding. Jesus rejoiced in the lilies of the field, the birds of the air, the warmth of human companionship. His beatitudes all begin with the word blessed. The first one has been translated: "How happy are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Much as we need energy to survive and enjoy life, there are delights that do not depend on massive systems of energy production.

Margaret Mead has said it beautifully. She blurted it out one day in her spontaneous way, and happily a tape recorder was turning. Here's what she said: "Prayer does not use any artificial energy, it doesn't burn up any fossil fuel, it doesn't pollute. Neither does song, neither does love, neither does the dance, neither does an arrangement of space in which people can enjoy their relationship to each other without having things built of steel or something of that sort."

There is a relationship between the energy crisis and the gods of this world. The church, by witnessing in word and deed to the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, can make its testimony that change must come, that there must be sacrifices, that even in the midst of suffering God calls us to practice justice and to rejoice.

8. How does change take place? Sometimes we deplore how little we can do about it all. But the truth is that we are neither omnipotent nor helpless. We can make some changes, undertaking at least symbolic acts of conservation and sharing that will do some good and will raise our consciousness from day to day. On the other hand, major social change requires both pressure and the lure of a vision. Pressure by itself is likely to result in a freeze or a backlash. But vision alone will not accomplish desired change either.

The news is that the pressure is on. The hope is that the Christian church can supply a vision.