



“Summary of article by E.F. Schumacher: *The Age of Plenty: A Christian View*” in *Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 1: A Survey of Ecological Economics*. Island Press: Washington DC, 1995. pp. 343-344

Social Science Library: Frontier Thinking in Sustainable Development and Human Well-being

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The optimism that modern science and technology could provide for all is being questioned on all fronts. Environmental degradation, resource scarcity and the limits to growth are responsible for a reconsideration of the efficacy of an industrial society. This article evaluates the future of industrial society from a Christian perspective. The Christian perspective flows from "The Fountainhead" of the St. Ignatius of Loyola which suggests that man should use the goods of the earth only so far as they help him attain a higher goal, and should withdraw when the material hinders the attainment of the higher goal.

If this premise is accepted then quantitative concepts like economic growth and the gross national product become meaningless. Whether is a good is good or bad need not determine the amount it adds to such quantitative measures. Rather than quantitative measures, qualitative concepts should be developed. The nature of income distribution is such that about one quarter of the world is immensely rich and about three-quarters are immensely poor, with very few in between. This duality is abnormal and unhealthy for both groups, since one has too much and the other too little. What exacerbates the problem is that rich societies are the perceived as the model which poor societies must follow and aspire to be like. The rich nations have used exorbitant resources in pursuit of their wealth. To suggest that modern science and technology has solved the production problem is fallacious, since modern production has required non-renewable energy resources. From a physical perspective it is impossible for poor nations to follow the path of the rich. Furthermore modern societies are facing a crisis of values which manifests itself in social unrest, rising drug addiction and crime. There should be a reassessment of our aims and objectives so as to redirect the system. Two important questions are how this can be done and who should do it?

In the modern world the technical and social methods of production are chosen and developed from the perspective of efficiency. However the concept of efficiency used is unrelated to the people involved in the production process and is defined in terms of the material aspects of production and profits. Organizing the production process with efficiency of materials as the criteria leads to a division of labor and specialization of tasks. The society that set up the production system in turn becomes molded by the logic of the production process. Thus a change of the aims and objectives of society needs a change of the production process, the prevailing technology and the existing organizational framework. The technological change required should move us away from the giantism, infinite complexity, vast expensiveness and violence to a system which is small, simple, cheap and non-violent.

Smallness implies bringing production units to a human scale and gives people independence in their activities. If production units are small they use few resources, a distinct advantage when large resources are becoming scarce. Their levels of pollution are less and they are ecologically better than bigger units. They lead to a more even distribution of income and cause less congestion. They are favored for a number of reasons. The reason production processes should be simple is that then there will be time, and energy for man to pursue other interests beyond making a living. This is important if the higher goals are to be achieved. If production processes are not cheap only the rich and powerful gain access to them. Cheap technologies can make the poor self-reliant and help create employment. Non-violence refers to man respecting the place of all animate and inanimate objects when dealing with them. The concept of non-violence takes many directions, but a good example is respecting and preserving the integrity of the ecosystem. In this case it would mean undertaking recycling of all organic materials and reducing our dependence on chemicals, reducing pollution etc.

The required move should be gradual. It requires change in small units and if we put people and not material consumption first. Change is possible if we keep in mind the message of "The Fountainhead."