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The role of the person of faith in the 21st century

Charles Morris | Oct. 13, 2011 Eco Catholic

What does a talk entitled *The Role of the Corporation in the 21st Century* have to do with communities of faith who wrestle with the issue of sustainability and energy? On Oct. 5, participants in the *Leaps Of Faith* sustainability conference at Aquinas College had the opportunity to hear a powerful talk by Andrew Hoffman [1] , director of the Erb Institute for Global Sustainable Enterprise at the University of Michigan as keynote.

Unprecedented change and challenges

Some of Hoffman's points were as follows:

- We are currently living in a time of unprecedented change.
- There is a growing disparity in the world between the haves and the have-nots (e.g., The richest 20 percent of the world's population consume 86 percent of all goods and services while the poorest 20 percent consume just 1.3 percent).
- The earth's ecosystems are under more stress than at any time in recorded history.
- The center of power in society was at one time the Church. Government succeeded as the center of power. Today the nexus of power is located in the Corporation. Therefore, if we are to make real change in terms of the ecosystem challenges we all face we have to come to terms with the role of the corporation, and how to make the corporation a positive force in addressing these challenges.
- We are at the cusp of the 4th wave in the sustainability revolution. The question is: how do we recognize sustainability when we see it?
- Going forward, we will look at a number of measures of sustainability: the tradeoffs made, transparency, stakeholder inclusion (who has a voice at the table), and a redefinition of the roles of business, government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Immersion of new benchmarks for sustainability

Hoffman used several examples as to how groups of folk with little apparent power are able to impact significant social change. Some include the targeting of Coca-Cola for human rights violations in South Africa, the role of Caterpillar as a tool in the Israeli resettlement policy, etc. Others are the rise of organizations that benchmark how companies perform on a number of environmental measures. Some of these include:

- The Equator Principles [2] which benchmark the social and environmental impacts in public financing in the developing world.
- The International Finance Corporation [3] which attacks poverty through micro-financing and other projects in the developing world.
- Dow Jones Sustainability Index [4]which tracks the financial performance of the leading sustainability-driven companies worldwide.
- Global Reporting Initiative [5] reports on companies' performance on sustainability measures such as the

ecological footprint.
- B Corporation [6] certifies corporations that are committed to use the power of business to solve social and environmental problems.

The role of the non-governmental organization (and faith community)

We are in a profound market shift in new products that fit into the triple bottom line paradigm (social equity, economic profit and environmental stewardship). And with the emergence of new partnerships, according to Hoffman, there is a concerted perceptual shift.

Individuals, environmental and faith-based organizations carry a key role in this new configuration. Managers in corporations committed to sustainability live in a creative tension between what Hoffman refers to "Bright Greens" (e.g., Nature Conservancy and Pew Center for Climate Change) and "Dark Greens" (e.g., Greenpeace and Earth First!). Both conciliatory (Bright Greens) and confrontational (Dark Greens) stances are necessary.

"Bright Greens" are positioned to provide change while the "Dark Greens" provide the challenge to go beyond the status quo by pushing the limits.

Where the church falls and where it should fall on the "Bright Green"/"Dark Green" continuum I will leave to the reader.

But to think that dramatic change toward a more sustainable world is impossible and that people of faiths' vision of a more just future is but a pipe dream I will share a couple of quotes that Hoffman shared with the listeners: "We don't like their sound, and guitar music is on the way out" (Decca Recording Co. rejecting the Beatles, 1962), or "I think there is a world market for maybe five computers." (Thomas Watson, chairman of IBM, 1943).

Rather, our vision going forward is reflective of a couple of other quotes Hoffman shared with us: "The future is not analyzed, it is invented." (Skip Laitner) and "To be truly radical is to make hope possible, not despair convincing." (Raymond Williams, 1921-1988).

As these exciting new possibilities present themselves, as new voices are sitting at the table, will the church be nimble and perceptive enough to remove itself of reified structures to perceive the new reality of the sustainability revolution? Will its voice at the table be heard?

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[1] http://www.andrewhoffman.net
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