

The Spiritual Dimension of Global Change

*Because we cannot know whether humanity will survive, we must act today as though the future of all humankind depended on us and at the same time trust wholly that God will remain true to his creation and not let it fall.*¹

I am grateful for the opportunity of contributing to this conversation, grateful because the bigger issues of sustainability, world population, equity, debt elimination and the place of humanity within the ongoing future of the non-human creation seem to have long since slipped from serious political discourse in the headlong rush for ‘growth’, wealth and profit. These issues of course remain real to the poor, disadvantaged and alienated. Thankfully they are also pertinent to those whose intellectual disciplines and social responsibilities insist that contemporary life and assumptions cannot continue without serious questioning.

Modern, western political life appears to be uncritically a child of the Enlightenment; committed to and obsessed by the idea of inevitable human progress. But have we not long passed the time when the shortcomings of the Enlightenment can remain unaddressed? Is it reasonable to trust that human reason will unerringly meet the challenges of advancement and how do we measure advancement? Is recent human history a testimony to ‘progress’. Can we any longer universally act as if humanity is the subject and everything else is the object?² Does relativity necessarily rule supreme? Can there not be a meta-narrative that gives meaning? Do the benefits of development always trickle down to the poorest of the poor?

‘Progress’ has become a reference point, both for a narrative undergirding the expectation of constant life style improvement, and an excuse for demolishing political opposition when the measuring sticks for its delivery appear not to have been achieved. It seems to have become the only political mantra and to be what passes for political discourse. “One might suggest that the demise of serious political discourse today consists only in this, that politicians are trying to whip enthusiasm for their version of this myth (progress), it’s the only discourse they know – while the rest of us have moved on”.³

A primary reason for confidence in progress, misplaced or otherwise, has been the experience, over many decades, of improved work place conditions, health and longevity as the result of technological invention. However, “technology can be both bane and blessing. Insofar as we give our ultimate allegiance to technology and its products, we have misplaced our faith and engaged in idolatry”.⁴ Technology can undermine certain mental processes and social relations that make human life worth living”.⁵ Technology cannot achieve in all

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Creating a Just Future* (London: SCM, 1989), 15.

² David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 264

³ Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007), 93.

⁴ Langdon Gilkey, *Society and the Sacred* (New York: Crossroads, 1981).

⁵ Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The surrender of culture to technology* (New York: Vintae,1993), xii

facets of life, what otherwise depends upon ethical behaviour, behaviour informed by a values system. Technology is seldom 'the problem'; however technology which is not employed within an ethical framework can be a major problem. Earlier this year Professor Will Stefan gave several addresses in conjunction with the publication of the report of the Climate Commission. In a Melbourne speech he stated that: "the future of humanity and the ecological health of the planet by the end of this century will be more impacted by lived human values than by hope based on technology". It is to a values system that I wish to turn.

Pro-active human behaviour is always informed by a values system and a values system is built upon the belief or ideology to which a person subscribes.

1. Individualism

The cult of the individual has become a ubiquitous ideology of western culture, ironically the culture most influenced by Christianity. While this cult is the most quirky of ideas to be associated with Christianity, it has nevertheless been given considerable comfort by Christianity's evangelical right. The influence of this form of Christianity in US politics in particular is well documented. The influence is also present in Australian politics through the range of Churches that gain a voice through the Australian Christian Lobby. In contrast to this cult, Christianity is premised on a doctrine that the fundamental nature of God is relational and that God has created a relational world. Moltmann expresses it succinctly: "According to modern mechanistic theory, things are primary, and their relationship to one another secondary and determined by natural laws. But... relationships are as original as things".⁶ Or as Joel Shuman puts it: "Community is a more fundamental ontological reality than biology".⁷

Both Christianity's doctrine of creation and its doctrine of redemption, emphasise the interdependence of all things, that any individual part of creation, human or non-human must be understood through its relationship with the whole creation. Dietrich Bonhoeffer asserts that human identity does not reside in the individual, but in a human being who must act as deputy to others. "The father acts as a deputy for the children... he is not an isolated individual, he combines in himself the selves of a number of other human beings... This reality shatters the fiction that the subject, the performer, of all ethical conduct is the individual. Not the individual in isolation but the responsible man is the subject, the agent, with whom ethical reflection must concern itself".⁸

Human beings are to seek fulfilment and blessing through the mutuality of their relationship with others. Indeed, core Christian doctrine is that there can be no being outside of

⁶ Moltmann 59.

⁷ Joel Shuman *The Body of Compassion: Ethics, Medicine and the Church* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1999), Chapter 3.

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (London: Collins Fontana, 1964), 224.

relationship. Recent contributions to eschatology have made the same point, as evidenced in the writings of Tom Wright:

In the last two hundred years western thought has over-emphasised the individual at the expense of the larger picture of God's creation. What is more, in much western piety since the middle ages the influence of Greek philosophy has been very marked, resulting in future expectations that bears far more resemblance to Plato's vision of souls entering into disembodied bliss than to the biblical picture of a new heaven and a new earth. If we start with the future hope of the individual, there is always the risk that we will, at least by implication, understand that as the real centre for everything and treat the hope of creation as mere embroidery around the edges.⁹

Such has appeared to be Christianity's championing of the individual that Lyn White Junior¹⁰ and the sociologist Max Weber¹¹ famously blame Christianity for the excesses of individualism in western culture and the over exploitation of the natural order. More recently Steven Bouma-Prediger has made the same point: "Some of the major maladies of the present world, for instance the reckless extravagant consumption of nature's irreplaceable treasures and the pollution of those of them that man has not already devoured – can in the last analysis be traced back to a religious cause, this cause is the rise of monotheism".¹²

The rise of the cult of the individual has been inextricably woven into an idea of the inalienable right of the individual to own almost anything. Again the thought that individuals can or should own anything and everything is a very quirky idea to biblical Christianity. The Old Testament world view, which Jesus inherited, was that no one had an inalienable right to own land. The most one could claim was the right to harvest land for a maximum of 49 years. While Christianity has unwittingly contributed to the rise of individualism through lack of understanding of its roots, or wilful disregard for fundamental Christian precepts, the rise of the cult of the individual and the concept of the individual's right to 'own' has been an outcome of the Enlightenment. As argued by Moltmann: "It was the Renaissance which first deprived nature of its rights and declared it to be 'property without an owner'".¹³

Whether or not we would all agree that western culture is shaped by Christianity is debatable, or at least the manner of that shaping is contested; however we all must agree that we are children of the Enlightenment. My first response therefore to the question of humanity's future is that such a future is contingent upon retaining some of the undisputed advantages of the Enlightenment and the continuing Industrial Revolution, while at the same time

⁹ Wright, 92.

¹⁰ White, Lynn. *The historical roots of our ecological crisis*. *Science* 155 (10 March 1967): 1203-1207. <http://www.uvm.edu/~gflomenh/ENV-NGO-PA395/articles/Lynn-White.pdf> (accessed 13 November 2011).

¹¹ Weber, Max, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. (London: Unwin University Books, 1930).

¹² Steven Bouma-Prediger, *The Greening of Theology* (New York: Scholars Press 1995), 2.

¹³ Moltmann, *Creating a Just Future* 68.

escaping from underneath the shackles of a culture of individualism which runs counter to 'natural order' and threatens to grossly contort what we know to be civilised society.

2. Debt

Biblical Christianity makes it clear that debt cannot be sustained. The sabbatical provisions including the sabbatical year and year of jubilee were instituted to ensure that debt never became entrenched. Christians visit the idea of debt and its debilitating consequences every time the Lord's Prayer is repeated. The fallout from national and international debt hits the headlines every day. We are concerned with the level of personal and household debt. We are concerned with the indebtedness of young people who, before they even begin a salaried position, have incurred indebtedness as the result of their education. However, as significant and as disturbing as these debts are, they are transparent, they can be measured and strategies can be argued to deal with them. Personal human debts, like the debt accrued through abuse is much harder to deal with and its consequences can be a life time of debilitating misery. In the context of this symposium, however, our concern is environmental debt. Environmental debt is the quantum gap created when human exploitation of the earth's natural resources exceeds the capacity of the earth to embrace regeneration and renewal. According to the Conservation Society this debt is now around 140% - 150%¹⁴ annually, that is to say human activity is greater by 140 -150% than the earth's annual capacity for renewal and regeneration.

The Sabbath provisions of the Old Testament guarded against the loss of economic, social and ecological cohesion. "Practices of release (jubilee) promoted social and economic stability (cohesion). On the one hand they prevented debtors from becoming too weak on the other hand they prevented creditors from becoming too strong".¹⁵ The theme of justice and equity runs deeply through the pages of scripture. The prophet Amos in the eighth century BC famously stated that cultic religious observances are of absolutely no consequence if there is no justice and equity for the marginalised and poor.¹⁶ According to the biblical historian, the Chronicler, the reason for the failure of the nation of Israel, and its demise into Exile in the fifth century BC was its inability to keep the sabbath provisions of equity and justice in relation to the land (2 Chron. 36: 21).

The final, most puzzling and most misquoted book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation contrasts the 'Mark of God' (chapter 22) with the 'Mark of the Beast' (Chapter 13). In the Hebrew language what is translated as the 'mark of the beast' can be understood as 'extortionate interest on money'. In other words indebtedness removes the dignity of the divine image, its outcome is godlessness. Using this as a metaphor it could therefore be said

¹⁴ http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/wprld_footprint

¹⁵ Patrick Logan, *Biblical Reflections on the Political Economy of Jubilee* (Southwark Diocese 1977), 11.

¹⁶ Amos was a prophet to the Northern Kingdom c 750BC. His most famous passage is Amos 5: 18-24)

that the floor of the stock market where vast amounts of money are traded, without reference to a product or without reference to human well being, is a God free zone.

“As in the jubilee and as in the Lord’s Prayer, debt is seen as the paradigmatic social evil”.¹⁷

It now appears that throughout the last decade ‘growth’ has been somewhat of a mirage; only achieved either through population expansion or through debt. Neither continuous population expansion nor increased debt is sustainable. If therefore it is true that genuine growth has been a mirage, at least for the duration of this century, it is urgent and essential that an economic system that is predicated on exponential growth be reformed before it collapses. The human world cannot sustain the kind of debt that led to the 2008 global economic crisis and the whole created order certainly cannot survive the rapidly expanding environmental debt that already manifests itself in loss of biodiversity, global warming and increased frequency of extreme weather conditions.

My second reflection therefore is that the future of humanity is contingent upon its capacity to deal with debt, especially environmental debt. The debt we chalk up every day because we do not deal with our addiction to energy sourced from fossil fuels is the single biggest threat to our future. Our future is entirely dependent upon the health of the earth’s ecologies. Our indebtedness places that health in a very vulnerable position.

3 Limits

The idea of ‘limits’ does not sit well within an aspirational society. We have been conditioned to believe that we should not accept limits, that somehow to accept limits is to deny the human capacity to extend horizons. I write these words having recently watched the Para-Olympics. To see in the athletes a capacity to extend well beyond what might reasonably be considered the limits of their disability has been truly inspirational. Limits referred to here are therefore not related to human striving, physical, intellectual or spiritual: but to acquisitional limits. It has long been a feature of all religions that to accept no limitation to acquisitional desire is dehumanising. Our culture is driven in the opposite direction. Acquisition is applauded. Indeed advertising frequently relies upon its capacity to make a connection between a product and a person’s well being.

In the world of research however there is no proven connection between acquisition and human happiness or well being. Research consistently indicates that there is no measureable benefit to human wellbeing when wealth extends beyond the level necessary for a basic standard of living. Indeed some of the evidence suggests the contrary.¹⁸

Creation theology is a celebration of abundance. Commitment to abundance is not a desire for a quantitative measurement but for a qualitative lived experience. How is the celebration of

¹⁷ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 41.

¹⁸ Tim Jackson, *Prosperity Without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (London: Earthscan, 2009), 143ff.

abundance to be manifested in human living? One of the most formative Old Testament stories is that of the manna in the wilderness. The people were to learn that there was always enough and that an attempt to gather too much was self-defeating because it resulted in decay, in the spoiling of it all. This narrative remains formative for the Judaeo/Christian community, living is to be modelled by this standard. The New Testament summary of this standard is: 'your abundance must be matched by other's needs'. "The one who had much did not have too much and the one who had little did not have too little" (2 Cor. 8:15).

Our culture appears to be driven more by the fear of scarcity than a celebration of abundance. Why otherwise do we have a habit of hoarding more than we need, the result of which is demonstrated by the fact that we throw away up to a third of all the food we buy? The festival of Ramadan in the Islamic community is a celebration of enough, a celebration of limits through fasting. However fasting is not Ramadan's destination, it is the acts of generosity and hospitality that such acceptance of limits makes possible. Abundance is protected through limitation.

In contrast, we have developed a consumerist world in which no limits are permitted, no 'commons' are recognised. As a result finite stocks are depleted and to what end: that we might all become obese and suffer type two diabetes?

My third reflection therefore is that the future of humanity is contingent upon our capacity to accept limits, limits which will enable acts of generosity and hospitality, limits which will enable humanity to flourish within the confines of a finite world. Now is not the place for a carefully crafted argument, but these limits must also include limits to human population expansion. The early biblical narrative which includes the so called divine commission to be fruitful and multiply is not a commission for endless numerical multiplication. It is a commission to humanity (and indeed to all living species) to continue their life, generation upon generation. The unlimited expansion of humanity now puts that more fundamental commission at risk.

I have rehearsed three contingent matters that arise from a Christian world understanding, matters which cause confidence in the future to be conditional. On the other hand Christianity is about confident hope. This is a very extraordinary world, and it is deeply loved by its creator.¹⁹ Wisdom about how to live appropriately is not a mystery. It is revealed through the various sciences, it is demonstrated through the arts, it resides within the inherent spirituality of all human beings and uniquely demonstrated in the lives of a few. How can we not live in confident hope? How can we be so stupid, so selfish, that we trade wisdom for self-interest and seemingly pursue death rather than life.

Bishop George Browning
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¹⁹ William Temple, *Readings in St John's Gospel* (London: Macmillan, 1959), 48.