

Christian responses to Climate Change and other Environmental issues

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When Europeans first settled Australia, post 1788, a narrative developed that the land was empty and therefore open to occupation without treaty or conversation. The early farmers were called squatters. This narrative, placed into law in the doctrine of Terra Nullius, has been the cause of painful and alienating injustice for Australia's indigenous people for 200 years. While the law was repealed by the High Court on 3 June 1992, the pain and alienation continues, and seems as hard to resolve today as it was from the outset. The narrative has taken deep root in the psyche of the immigrant community, to the huge disadvantage of the minority indigenous people.

This narrative developed partly out of self interest and partly out of unchecked observation; that is to say the white community did not observe ownership in the way they had understood it in Europe and therefore assumed it did not exist. The fact that people had formed close liturgical, cultural, emotional and spiritual links with the land was completely missed; further more, knowledge of independent nation groupings with their own language, travelling routes and meeting areas is barely better understood today than it was then.

Following the dreadful events of 9/11 a narrative of quite another kind developed in international affairs which can be best understood by the simple caption "axis of evil". Because certain groupings of people were seen to be threatening in their difference, they were classified as "evil": in response, an alliance of countries which include Great Britain and Australia considered themselves justified in taking pre-emptive military action, most notably in Iraq. This narrative is now universally questioned for its truth and appropriateness; in the meantime the consequences which flowed from it will continue to affect international relationships for decades to come. The enmity that arose as a direct consequence of that narrative is not easily undone

Whether conscious or unconscious, all human beings live out of narrative which can be both life giving and life threatening, personal and global, conscious and unconscious, rational and irrational. The narrative which gives most meaning to our life becomes the springboard for our actions.

The Christian faith is above all a narrative: written and verbal, liturgically celebrated, culturally dressed and intellectually owned. This story has remained unchanged for 2000 years although its implications for living have to be constantly revisited in the changing culture of each succeeding generation. The Christian narrative has always taken for granted one single world with many parts: diversity in a single unity. (Christianity is rightly referred to as one of the great monotheistic religions). It is the Christian view that any single part of the created order finds its beauty and meaning in relation to the whole and that the whole exists to bring fulfilment to each individual part. Indeed the whole is always greater than the sum of the parts. In other words the Christian creation story takes for granted a profound and complex interrelatedness and pronounces as heresy any teaching which allows for the dominance or prosperity of one part of the created order at the expense of another. I acknowledge that Genesis 1:26 has been used as an excuse for domination and exploitation, and that many secular groups see Christianity as the problem rather a contributor to the solution; but the verse, in the context of the whole scriptural narrative cannot be read this way. The vocation of human beings is to live in harmony with the created order and act as stewards of it.

This is where I would like to begin as I sketch a Christian response to the current environmental crisis. The environmental crisis is caused by submission to a secular narrative that under girds the global economy, a narrative that is only partly right and because it is only partly right, in our context its consequences are morally wrong. The narrative is of an open market, (a metaphor which is not true because the hidden monopolies and power structures do not have the transparencies associated with a “market”) and of deregulated capitalism which, it asserts, delivers exponential growth and prosperity for all. The problem is that this narrative lends itself without check to opportunism and exploitation and cannot be sustained. We now need several planets to feed the appetite. It is a narrative that is controlled not by the many, but by the few, who are in positions of economic and political power. To challenge the narrative is to invite patronisation at best and being held in derision at worst. Earlier this year I was invited to preach at Westminster Abbey at the memorial service to Australians who lost their lives in the Victorian bushfires. In the 8 minute sermon I dared to link the catastrophe to an outcome of the human footprint which is having a dangerous impact upon the complex balances that affect our climate. While the sermon was received with flattering praise in many quarters it was dealt with scathing contempt by the *Australian* newspaper, a national daily that has self-interested reasons for wanting to continue the futility of denying the link between human activity and its affect upon the climate.

This secular narrative which informs the western way of life, drives the world economy, and causes enormous damage to global ecology; has become a narrative of personal prosperity not community well being, a narrative of exploitation rather than stewardship, of growth rather than sustainability, of winners and losers rather than partners, of unimagined wealth alongside abject poverty, of huge gain without

meaningful contribution, of the supremacy of self interest over a commitment to common good, of incentive and reward given to the top end of the food chain with scant regard care or thought given to those on the bottom end of the same chain.

Economy and ecology are twin pillars supporting civilisation as we have come to experience it. Our early ancestors knew only of ecology. When an agrarian way of life developed, it became possible for the few to grow enough food for the many, enabling the many to follow other pursuits, including the arts. It was then that a fledgling economy became inevitable. The economy draws everything from the ecology. The ecology is the great but not limitless resource which sustains all human endeavour and from which all wealth and prosperity is derived; the economy is the humanly devised system by and through which commodities are traded. Regard given only to the former, i.e. the economy, with scant or no regard for the latter, will, as Jerrod Diamind illustrates in his monumental book "*Collapse*", ultimately and inevitably result in the death of the civilisation that thrived upon it. That there is an underlying flaw in human nature has long been the observation of Christianity. Given our propensity to self interest, it is almost inevitable that with half a chance, human beings will indulge themselves to the point of destruction even when the signs on the road are saying please turn around, this is a dangerous path. If we have doubted this truth, witness the world economy in October 2008. Unrestrained greed drove us to the point of total collapse; what saved a cataclysmic collapse was not the action of highly motivated and selfless individuals in the private sector, no, what saved us from catastrophe was the action of politicians who recognised the irony that without commitment to public and common good, the interests of private individuals would be under greater threat. In the long term individuals cannot prosper at the expense of common good, but because of it. Tragically, since that time what we have not observed a commitment to a new and possibly life giving narrative, but a desire to return as quickly as we can to our old ways.

Similarly, if we doubt the truth, witness the unquestionable weight of scientific opinion which for some time has not only made the environmental crisis crystal clear; but has also made clear what the response needs to be; and the consequences if we fail to act. To judge the global response to this point, we would rather hang our coat on the hook of the lone scientist, the approximately 5% which questions considered science, rather than face up to the changes that are required. In December the world community will gather in Copenhagen to try to agree a globally disciplined way forward over coming years. Sadly there is little real optimism that sufficiently robust restraints will be placed upon carbon emissions and other environmentally destructive practices. The reason is not that we do not understand the consequences of a limited response, nor that we have misunderstood the science: no, it is that we, believer and non-believer, Christian and secularist, we remain unquestionably committed to the prevailing secular narrative which demands gratification now rather than invest in a sustainable future. We have convinced ourselves that we must maintain whatever economic advantage we believe we have over others in the global community, rather than build common good. The false narrative that we can still win at the price of another's loss prevails. We still have not fully accepted the narrative that this is a

single world with many parts, that loss in one place will mean loss in every place. Strangely this truth does not seem to have been embraced by some sectors of the Christian community either. The most wealthy Anglican Diocese in Australia, and one of those most influential in the world has recently revealed that it lost \$A100,000,000 in the stock market collapse and has admitted that this came about as a direct result of borrowing money to invest on the equities market. What is extraordinary is that the Diocese, which is perhaps the most Puritan of all Anglican Dioceses, convinced itself that this was not gambling, was not an attempt to make a substantial win at the expense of someone else's loss. To borrow someone else's money and place it on the equity market is not a legitimate investment and in other quarters would result in immediate and serious consequences for those responsible.

Why is it that we are so committed to a consumerist view of the world? If a person from the West were to spend a significant amount of time in a community of the two thirds world, be it the outskirts of Lima in Peru, the squatter camps on the edges Manilla the Philippines, or a black township like Guguletu on the outskirts of Johannesburg SA they would probably experience more laughter than they do at home. To live in material poverty does not necessarily mean a diminishment of human happiness and fulfilment. In fact, apart from abject poverty and the pain that goes with squalor, it is well documented that happiness or contentment does not increase, pro rata with increased wealth or prosperity, indeed, the comparison can be negative. Fulfilling relationships lead to a happiness that the accumulation of products simply cannot provide; the knowledge that one is loved delivers a level of fulfilment not available through positions of power; membership of a community delivers a contentment and peace that no security system can guarantee.

The new narrative that must under gird changed economic behaviour in response to the threat of climate change is not (as politicians are afraid) a narrative of less, but of more; not of diminished life style, but of life style enhanced. Sadly, Christian theology and western economic systems have supported each other in the creation of a world of heightened individuality at the expense of diminished community life, a world in which more and more has to be spent on protecting what we have from the neighbours who have not. In a healthy community there are no locked doors and no one is hungry. In a healthy community there is no necessity for everyone to own everything for many items can be shared. It was said of the early Christian community that "they held all things in common". We will not adequately or sufficiently change the behaviour of the world community in response to the climate change crisis simply by speaking of light globes; we need a narrative which holds before us the spectre of life in greater fulfilment.

Australia, like many other countries is working towards a *Bill of Rights*. It is hard to argue against this proposition for like motherhood human rights are always worth protecting. However, the difficulty with a *Bill of Rights* is that the only entity at law with rights is the individual. I do not believe this to be the case. I believe

communities have rights; indeed, generations yet to be born have rights. I do not believe I have the right to smoke in an environment where I can harm others and I do not believe I have the right to emit limitless carbon, simply because I can, or I have the money that enables me to do so. Like tobacco smoke it is now clear that the emission of green house gases, especially limitless tons of CO₂ causes untold damage to the environment and its abundant diversity of species, whilst unjustly threatening those who have contributed least to the problem, the poor of the world and to generations yet to be born. A self imposed but independently monitored and verified limitation of carbon and other emissions is therefore urgently required and its imposition is first required by the largest emitters per head of population not the largest emitters in gross terms. In other words, limitation imposed upon every American or Australian citizen at approximately 20 tons per person per year is more urgent than a limitation on every Chinese at 5 tons per person per year, even though in gross terms the number of Chinese between them have now become the world's greatest emitters. We can have no moral persuasion to influence the limitation of emissions in countries like China and India until our emissions are reduced to a level per head of population that is lower than theirs.

The dominant economic narrative of our time is one of exponential growth. Without growth, so we are told, we face recession or depression. Economic growth has reaped enormous prosperity for those of us who live in the West. We are at least twice as prosperous as our grandparents were 50 and more years ago. However it is not rocket science to understand that exponential growth, based upon an expanded exploitation of natural resources is simply not sustainable in the long term. If all the world were to enjoy the life style enjoyed by most in the west, a life style and level of development which the Chinese and Indians rightly tell us they are morally entitled to, we need much more than one planet. Professor Ian Lowe, until recently the Chair of the Australian Conservation Foundation puts it this way: "until a decade and a half ago the tension between human need and the capacity of the world to produce was in balance, now we use up the resources available to us in any given year by about October". Our level of environmental indebtedness to the future is as serious as our economic indebtedness.

The economy as we know it can be simply described as a trade economy. I have something that you are prepared to buy. At the point of exchange what we trade holds its greatest value, as hours days months and years roll on what we traded loses its value and in most cases ceases to have any; therefore to maintain growth more has to be cut down, dug up and exploited this year than last year, the speed of the expansion is exponential. Trade is opportunistic. I will look for a space or gap in the market and attempt to fill it, necessary or not. It is the aim of the trade economy to fill all the human gaps or spaces until none are left. Goods are placed in supermarket stalls to entice us to take home 20 – 30% more than we intended. But here is the rub, human beings live in the spaces; the Spirit flies and whirls and flourishes in the spaces; space or gap was the first work of God's creation, to fill it all is not to add but to diminish. It is ironic that the consumerism which is exploited and advertised as the way to life fulfilment, is in fact the way to life diminishment – as well as ecological disaster; for

it is when all the spaces are filled that we can guarantee that human beings will behave at their worst. It is only in the spaces, what the Bible calls shalom, that human beings can flourish and the ecological order can find its balance once more.

It is therefore urgent that we develop a different economic narrative, one that is based upon sustainability rather than exploitation, of partnership rather than ownership, of space rather than consumer in fill, and of growth that is organic and life giving rather than accumulative with no returning cycle of blessing. We must develop language and imagination that takes us out of a worn individualistic unregulated capitalist narrative that no longer serves our hopes for the future, to a sustainable story of human values that coexist with, indeed enhance, environmental well being. The task is huge and urgent, especially with the pressure of an ever expanding world population; however it is not beyond us.

A significant marker in the way to the discovery of a sustainable economic narrative for our time is the Christian understanding of gift. Christians understand all of life to be gift, the natural order is gift, another human life is gift, the smile of a child or the wisdom of the elderly is gift, the unmapped landscape of a newly dawned day is gift. Unlike trade, gift continues to expand in its value in the giving, by tomorrow its blessing has multiplied. Gift creates space, unlike a traded commodity that fills it, therefore expanding the movement possible for the human spirit. Space was the first act of God's creation, separating light from darkness, water from land and the heavens from the earth: an environment was created through which life might flourish. Remove the space and life is diminished, return the space and the environment will regenerate itself and human behaviour will improve. Gift might be material in substance but in its reception it can become of infinitely more value in its redeeming, restorative, reconciling, healing quality. Unlike trade which is almost always simply the exchange of a static consumer commodity, gift can build assets. By assets I mean the contributors to human life that engender meaning, value, purpose. Health is an asset as is education, appreciation of beauty, an intimate relationship, family life, the wisdom of the elderly, the love and distinctiveness that flows from disability. Above all, a vibrant and healthy environment is our prime asset, an environment in which the balance of life is maintained, diversity flourishes, rivers run clear and fish prosper; an environment in which the air is clear and the lights of heaven can be observed by all in wonder and awe. It is now a widely accepted truth that although the present generation is twice or perhaps thrice as prosperous as its grandparents 50 years ago it is not twice as happy or contented. While we are surrounded with more and more consumer items, it seems as if our real assets have diminished.

So what might a gift based economy look like, an economy that does not seek to replace a trade based economy, but one that seeks to give it the balance it currently lacks: indeed seeks to give it the grace to evolve into an economy that has the capacity to survive into the 21st Century rather than collapse under its own unsustainable weight? How can we tell the narrative, the story, of this economy in a way that

inspires, encourages and gives hope? This is the challenge. We cannot deal with the environmental crisis without addressing the fundamentals of the economic narrative and we cannot evolve a more appropriate economic system without securing the environment.

Here are some snapshots to illustrate the narrative of a gift based economy.

- The educational system at primary, secondary and tertiary level addresses its curriculum through the prism of human values that build assets, rather than its current single emphasis upon a point scoring analysis of technology and skill development geared towards productivity. Teachers treat as of equal importance their, and their students knowledge of and commitment to gift; to values that are life sustaining and asset building. They hold them as of equal merit to the acquiring of technical and analytical skill. In the 2009 class room and lecture hall the subliminal teaching is that productivity is everything, you are what you produce. This is simply not true, we are what we become. We are *human beings* first, not human producers. At the end of the day that which will provide contentment, fulfilment and joy is the mutuality of life giving relationships within community. Because of the huge indebtedness accrued by students at tertiary level, there is also subliminal teaching that debt is ok as a way of life, including by implication environmental debt. Students finish their university education have imbibed a life time culture of debt.
- Regulation is restored to the banking system so that banks only lend what is deposited with them. The primary business of banks is to serve individuals and organisations that do business with them; they have become businesses that serve their shareholders first. They do not have the right to “print money” by circulating that which is not theirs to circulate. Such restraint will itself be a gift in the normalising of economic life and preventing a return to an artificially unsustainable level of borrowing and the unnecessary raping of the environment. Such regulation will also begin to normalise salary levels that have escalated to the grotesque, for CEO’s are now hired and judged by their capacity to earn for their company that which cannot be earned without winning at someone else’s loss, including that of the environment. It is always a gift to secure the common good even if as a consequence it restricts the capacity of individuals to quarantine a substantial profit in their private domain.
- Regulation is put in place at a global level to prevent money being made by those who simply trade in it without contributing to the common good. Such regulation would severely restrict the activity of hedge fund operators and traders who are not there to invest and build the value of a company, but who

simply gamble that on any given day certain stocks will rise or fall: indeed to curtail the activity of those whose artificial trading is in itself the cause of stocks rising or falling. We must build a cultured understanding that all human acquisition comes ultimately from the natural environment, that which is acquired without value contributed “steals” from the ultimate resource – the environment

- Environmental cost is weighed with equal seriousness as financial cost by government and boardroom. Such consideration will automatically initiate an emission reduction target and commit to a carbon neutral economy. Such a move will not cause the death of capitalism as we know it, on the contrary, businesses will quickly adapt to the re positioning of the goal posts. Businesses cannot make this shift, only government can move goal posts and so far the energy invested by governments world wide to achieve this end has been abysmal. Please God they will get their act together this year in Copenhagen. Governments world wide have not made a very good fist of very much in recent years, focusing of the mind in this area will be the single biggest gift they can offer.
- Trade regulations are revisited to alter the balance of power from a bias towards those who are already prosperous to a bias towards those who are poor. Currently poorer countries of the world are unable to gain the best possible price for their products because of unfair protection and limitations placed by those who are wealthy.
- There is shift in the mind of ordinary people away from an overriding commitment to private wealth towards a balancing desire for the development of the common good. Such a desire will automatically diminish the need for very expensive and out of proportion security towards partnerships and better mutual understanding and respect. Such a commitment will help those countries that are prosperous to realise that the potential loss of their comparative position of wealth vis a vis other nations, will not reduce overall enjoyment of life of their people, but has the potential to greatly enhance it. (Imagine a world in which a significant proportion of the annual budget currently spent on security and armed forces were diverted to building social cohesion).
- In personal conversation as well as international trade the question should move from what empty space have you in your consumer laden life that we can fill, to what assets do you have that might be enhanced through mutual cooperation. Australia might, for example, recognise that its considerable uranium deposits will help India and China reduce its carbon emissions

through the development of nuclear energy, however rather than selling the product for the maximum possible return, it will lease the product under terms that see the waste finally returning to its place of origin. It may also see the economies of pacific island countries as well as Brazil being supported and enhanced to compensate for the fact that it is in the common good for rainforests everywhere to suffer no further erosion.

One does not have to go very far in the addressing of the environmental crisis before we come up against the prevailing economic narrative. That this narrative can be changed, must be changed, is of the utmost importance for the future of humankind on this planet.

Within its core narrative Christianity has always been up to the task. What must happen with equal urgency is that the Church ceases to place its energy into the wasteful and divisive debate on human sexuality and place its emphasis upon the narrative that has the capacity to transform the world that we are told God loves so much that he sent his Son.

Bishop GV Browning

Convener Anglican Communion Environment Network

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