



Planet Earth: Christian Values and the Principle of Sustainability

Bishop George Browning

Bishop George Browning (Australia) was ordained 45 years ago as priest of the Anglican Church. He has served as principal of one theological college and vice principal of another. He became a Bishop in 1985, and since 1998 has been an international spokesperson for the Anglican Communion on environmental issues, and currently chairs the international Anglican Communion Environment Network. He retired as the Bishop of Canberra, Australia in 2008 and currently researches, speaks and writes on the intersection between religious faith and environmental issues.

It is not possible to talk about Christian values without understanding the Christian belief that undergirds them. The fifth (and final) mark of mission of the International Anglican Communion is derived from what we believe.

"To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and to sustain and renew the earth".

Christian belief is focused through the life, death and resurrection of the historical person Jesus Christ, in whom Christians believe both the true nature of God, and also humanity's true nature, is revealed. This revelation is the culmination and fulfilment of the whole biblical story and it is to that story that we must turn to answer the question: "How do Christian values impact upon, and perhaps synergise with, values aspired to by bodies such as the Earth Charter?"

1. Adam and the Adamah. It is Christian understanding that the name given to humanity 'Adam' is derived from the name that describes the earth, 'Adamah'. Our primary identity connects us with the earth. Indeed our flourishing is inextricably tied to the flourishing of the earth. We are to understand that 'Adam' should not be understood as a single person, let alone a single male, but

refers to and is inclusive of the whole humanity. The destiny of humanity is therefore inextricably tied to the health and well being of the non-human creation. As we value the earth and all living things we value ourselves. As we dishonour the earth and other living things we dishonour ourselves.

2. Stewardship and hostility. In the creation narrative two completely opposite and irreconcilable pictures are painted of humanity's role with non-human creation. On the one hand it is made clear that we are to be stewards; the Hebrew word means: 'to be custodians of that which belongs to another'. On the other hand it appears that humanity is commissioned with unequal power, to control and subdue creation for our own benefit. While the two are irreconcilable, they reflect the truth of human experience. The desire for harmony, wholeness, peace or 'shalom' is a 'crie de coeur' from every generation of human beings; but lived human experience in every generation is also of hostility, alienation and destruction. Every generation lives with both, every individual must accept the possibility and responsibility of contributing to both. Christian faith therefore recognises the tension involved in being 'a part of' creation and yet being 'apart from' creation. This tension is very hard to resolve, but the first step in doing so

is to acknowledge that it exists. Christian values are therefore underlined by a concept that is hard to translate into English, its Greek being 'metanoia'. The word is usually translated 'repentance', but this is not necessarily its most helpful translation. It means 'to see differently', in other words to be open to the truth and to be transformed by it. This value is vitally important in the present context where there is militant self interested opposition to change and therefore little political appetite for it.

3. Work and blessing. The hebdomadal cycle is almost universally and cross-culturally accepted in the 'working week'. However its origins and intention are less well known and almost totally ignored. The creation narrative does not literally mean creation in seven days but 'a complete period of time', founding and embracing all history. At its heart is a rhythm called 'rest'. This word does not mean cessation from work but the harmony and peace of living within creation's bounds. Words associated with it are 'shalom', 'jubilee' 'fulfilment', 'harmony', 'hallowing' and 'blessing'. In other words it is Christian belief that creation has set within it rhythms and cycles that cannot be abrogated by humanity without consequence. That we have endeavoured to replace such a cycle with our own is at the heart of our problem. Our cycle, colloquially called '24/7', is essentially a cycle of productivity. Its driving force has become the fear of scarcity. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is our measure of the rhythm's success. The irony is that we produce to increase our wellbeing, but increasingly the means (productivity) is making the goal (wellbeing) more elusive. The Christian values of harmony, wholeness, justice, and wellbeing are all interconnected and relate back to the cycle we believe is set within creation and which we have abrogated to our peril.

4. Humanity and individuality. Since the Enlightenment, the western world has focussed its values on the individual, individual rights, private property and private ownership. Strangely and sadly Christianity has reinforced this emphasis. It is both

strange and sad because the Christian faith is not primarily about individuals, but about communities and about relationships. Christian belief is belief in a relational God from whom we are blessed with a relational world. In expressing both his Christian belief as well as his cultural understanding of 'Ubuntu', Desmond Tutu is able to say; "a person is a person through other people". He might as well have said, a person is a person in relationship: with God, other people, and the whole created order. At the conclusion of the flood narrative, part of the creation story, humanity is blessed by God in the company of all living things that come out of the ark. A single human being is only blessed through others and especially through harmonious relationship with all living things.

5. Competition and cooperation. Since the Enlightenment and particularly since the extraordinary contribution of Darwin, humanity has tended to measure its progress by maximising the value of competition and minimising the value of cooperation. The ultimate Christian value is of a single community where the boundaries exaggerated by competition are eliminated and where all have equal access to the 'common good' or more specifically to 'Common Wealth'. The early Christian Community was described as a community 'having all things in common'. The Christian community does not argue for the elimination of competition, it is an indelible part of our identity; but we argue for a world of balance and if one is to have ascendancy it should be cooperation.

It is said that two pillars support the house in which we all live, economy and ecology. "Economy" has become the pillar of human competitiveness. Because economy is given almost complete ascendancy over ecology, there are two very serious outcomes. Firstly, we now live in a world of gross inequity. The wealth and opportunity held by the top 5% exceeds the wealth and opportunity of the vast majority of the world's population. We know that gross inequity invites painful correction.

Secondly, competition has not simply been between human beings, but between human beings and the environment. Ecological balance and harmony has been put under relentless and escalating pressure. The stupidity of human activity is that we fail to understand that our destiny is tied to the health and flourishing of the whole created order. We are part of the creation with which we are competing. Our frenetic activity is putting our ongoing life on this planet at risk. Darwin was right about evolution, but we have been wrong to conclude that competition is the value that most enhances human development and survival - it is not, it is cooperation.

6. Righteousness and Justice. As a legal construct, justice is the restoring of the scales to balance. In ancient societies this was sometimes achieved through the principle of 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' or perhaps more frequently through the mechanism of the scapegoat. Scapegoating remains a frequently used although usually unnamed mechanism. The judicial system in the western world delivers justice through punishment with rising community pressure for punitive rather than restorative action. However, the most serious human situations cannot be resolved this way, as witnessed by South Africa post-apartheid and Rwanda post-genocide. Both countries had to be restored through reconciliation and forgiveness.

The Christian justice ideal is not simply a legal construct. It has a moral dimension and is tied to the principle of hope. Christian hope is linked to the resurrection and by association so is justice. Justice is delivered when hope is restored, when the causes of alienation, inequity and hostility have been addressed. Ecological justice is the naming of conditions through which bio-diversity is secured, relationships become harmonious and life giving, and pressure is reduced to allow recovery and restoration. Ecological justice therefore coheres with the Christian value of justice in that at its heart lies reasonable hope in a sustainable future. The implications of this value are yet to be properly

worked through. Those who wish to protect the status quo of economic exploitation argue that reduced productivity impacts human poor. However the truth is that human poverty is increasingly related to ecological poverty; to address one is to address the other. Justice therefore requires that determination to eliminate ecological and human poverty should be a joint enterprise.

The twentieth century Christian philosopher/theologian, Simone Weil, warns that justice is elusive in situations of unequal power. She argues the powerful can, in the name of justice, do good or do harm. Justice is not something that can be done for the weaker party, but requires a context in which the weaker party discovers their own empowerment. While there are 'things to be done' by humans for the non-human creation, the most important responsibility for humanity is to give the created order space for its own restoration. Hence the reduction of carbon emissions remains the number one responsibility.

7. Liberty and Freedom in Western culture are valued through the prism of individual rights. Political Parties right of centre are most resistant to responsible action designed to mitigate escalating human impact upon the environment, because they interpret such action as a violation of private enterprise and individual rights. Media outlets that ideologically support this proposition unflinchingly attempt to diminish and demean those who insist upon responsible action, describing them at best as 'out of step'.

The Christian value of liberty is in this context entirely counter cultural. "The glorious freedom (liberty) of the children of God", is the belief that true freedom is relational, and especially that it is not 'freedom to do whatever you like'. In the Christian sense freedom is participation in a life-giving community, accepting limitations to the personal ego and aspiring to enjoy the abundance that comes from life giving engagement. For Christians this is the community of Jesus where heaven has come to

meet earth, and potentially at least, all barriers of exclusion are abolished to be replaced by a single identity - children of God. This value again coheres with the global objective. We have now reached a point in human history where no nation can say its interests must be paramount. Global best interest is now best interest for all nations and all their citizens.

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