

From little things, big things grow – well, maybe not just yet

Perceptions of Human-Earth connections continue to be dominated by Mainstream economic and population growth agendas and consumption-promoting lifestyles

Several thoughts set the scene for the discussion in this paper: Humanity has become a planetary geophysical force. The consequences of its actions have left the security of water, food, energy, climate, oceans and rivers, other species, their habitats and ecosystems, biological diversity, and its increasing human population in a precarious state so that emergency action must now be contemplated.

Additionally, these sentiments from Paul Collins point to a new direction for spirituality studies. “We need to turn back to the natural world itself from which we originally sprang, and we have to re-interpret our religious and cultural experience in the light of our interaction with that natural world. So at heart this book is about the deep theological, human, and cultural shift that contemporary ecology inevitably implies.” (‘God’s Earth – Religion as if matter really mattered’, Dove, 1995.)

Describing what is meant by ‘Mainstream’ for these purposes

We say ‘economic growth works’ – meaning for all the human residents of the planet - and measure our progress against annual changes in Gross Domestic Product.

Reports of infrastructure extensions, whether to roads, ports, airports, are hot news. We go on growing our population beyond widely recommended stabilization levels. We celebrate the exquisite clothing, the luscious meals and wines, the breathtaking travel destinations, the beauty of well-designed homes and gardens. A lot of us are not too happy with building ‘outwards’, but whatever we do we accept that we shouldn’t stop building, and maybe go ‘upwards’. We have musical brilliance at our fingertips, cars honed to eye-catching and ever-upgraded technical perfection, aircraft and ships that can take us to the ends of the earth. And there’s the magical capacity allowed us by communication and information technologies, and life spans for many not dreamt of a few years ago. Shopping, of course, has a special place, and retail downturns are lamented as top news. And we expect all these goodies to be supplied at cheaper and cheaper prices.

In other words, the beauties and benefits promised to all – including those living in the developing countries - and supplied by a system we can call ‘Mainstream’.

But suddenly, it would seem, we are faced with unthinkable and perhaps unanswerable dimensions of life that once upon a time we couldn’t even start to measure, but now can. Thus, as just one example of that measuring process, Edward O. Wilson says: ‘The wealth of the world, if measured by domestic product and per-capita consumption, is rising. But if calculated from the condition of the biosphere, it is falling..... ’ (The Future of Life, 2002.)

And so it becomes possible to ask, to some extent sadly, *altogether, is the human achievement too much?*

In other words, is global society, increasingly in the thrall of a dominant Mainstream growth agenda characterized by economic (production and consumption expansion need not be bounded), population (global numbers and immigration levels are not a concern) and techno-scientific (techno-advances are an unquestioned blessing) overstepping Earth's limits?

Novelist, Ian McEwan sums up the situation, in a way reminiscent of the Ehrlich-Holdren formula of $I=PAT$ (environmental impact is a product of population size, consumption/affluence levels and the technologies used). 'The sheer pressure of our numbers, the abundance of our inventions, the blind forces of our desires and needs, appear unstoppable and are generating a heat - the hot breath of our civilisation - whose effects we are beginning to comprehend only too clearly.' (The force of nature, The Age, 8/3/2008).

So, can humanity's exuberance, not to mention its power to devastate, be restrained? And if so, can an alternative wisdom derived from the world's religions, cultural humanism and environmental science, so small in influence against the Mainstream dominance, coalesce to emerge as the new 'big thing'?

Questions for the Mainstream ethos

Political leaders in various ways continue to remind us that we are 'Mainstream' people.

Do we all remember the 2007 election campaigns? The air was filled with 'Go for Growth' (John Howard); 'Economic growth works' (Paul Keating). These statements have merit, seen in context, but they don't ask qualifying questions - what time horizon are you looking at, the last 200 years? For how far into the future?'

And a more radical critique says? 'It's difficult to imagine how anyone who understands the general 'limits to growth' case can avoid concluding that consumer-capitalist society is not just grossly unsustainable, *it simply cannot be made sustainable.....*For several decades some of us have been saying the only way out of our global predicament is by huge, radical transition to some form of Simpler Way of living, core elements being non-affluent lifestyles, mostly small local economies under participatory social control, not driven by market forces, profit or growth.' (Ted Trainor, 'Can Australia's consumer society reduce climate emissions to safe levels?' Pacific Ecologist, Winter 2008.) Stark as it is, the statement as one possible measure of what might be needed to turn things around should not be ignored.

What little things by way of an alternative wisdom did we start with, looking back to Newman Apostolate days and looking today with the wisdom that we can muster for our times?

The short statements, with little exposition, such as those of Golden/Buckley in ‘The Incarnation in the University’ (1955), and the Buckley position in ‘Cutting Green Hay’ (1983), give us an entrance into some early insightful thinking about relationships between Christian humanists and expansive attitudes towards the rest of nature. Both Golden and Buckley expounded on St. Paul’s words about winning back all things, whether on earth or in heaven, to God. Thus, ‘In coming into the world Christ not only redeemed man but in a sense redeemed all things. Hear St. Paul: “it is God’s good pleasure to let all completeness dwell in Christ, and through him to win back all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace with them through his blood shed on the Cross’. (Father Jerry Golden SJ, Preface.)

In ‘Cutting Green Hay’, (1983), referring back to events at a 1961 UCFA conference, Buckley becomes more pointed: ‘It is the otherness of nature, not its beauty, that calls for reverence. It is spiritually inadequate to see the world as lying outside ourselves to be controlled.’

Today, the dire state of the global environment - all creatures, species and ecosystems, the whole of Creation - is an issue of very wide concern, and one with openings back to discussions in the early days of the Apostolate. *Indeed, it is unlikely that a more arresting situation requiring all people of good will to exercise their minds and hearts - ‘a charity to think’ - can be imagined.*

What of later Church, theological and philosophical developments

Out of a different court, and not obviously derived from these statements of Golden/Buckley, there have been other expositions but clearly with sympathetic links.

The following comments are necessarily picky, not comprehensive, given space constraints.

The Earth Charter and Millenium Goals documents of the United Nations, for example, have given significant impetus to the advancement of many pertinent directions of thinking in this area of human-earth connections.

Truly inspirational writers have emerged: Thomas Berry said in 1988: ‘If we lived on the moon, our mind and emotions, our speech, our imagination, our sense of the divine would all reflect the desolation of the lunar landscape.’

Edward O. Wilson, in his imaginary talk to Henry Thoreau. ‘You searched for essence at Walden and, whether successful in your own mind or not, you hit upon an ethic with a solid feel to it: nature is ours to explore forever; it is our crucible and refuge; it is our natural home; it is all these things. Save it, you said: in wildness is the preservation of the world.’ (The Future of Life, 2002).

But taking up this position is not without its trials. Well known Irish writer on religion and ecology, Sean McDonagh, had a disappointing time in the 1980's: 'The ecological crisis obviously demanded profound reflection and a comprehensive religious response, but I looked in vain for any theological writing on the subject.'.... 'ecotheology, the subject of this book, is a very recent phenomenon.' (Review of 'Ecotheology: voices from the South and North, David Hallmann, World Council of Churches, Publications and Orbis Books, The Tablet, 24/8/1996.)

Nevertheless, the range more recently of discussion of earth-human-religion connections is striking. There are intellectual explorations: From eco-theology, eco-philosophy, eco-feminism, aboriginal spirituality, 'deep ecology', in writings on 'biophilia to describe an inherent affinity for life and lifelike process'. And there's a flood of materials from practitioners, on permaculture, on health processes and the healing benefits for prisoners, office workers, hospital patients from access to nature and companion animals, on scientific work that's letting us into a better understanding of animal behaviour and consciousness.

And not forgetting Pope John 2's: 'The natural world has value in itself and not merely for its use by humans.' (Ethical Principles for the Environment, 1990 World Day of Peace message.)

Sources are too many to mention. Suffice to say that through commissioned writings, collected sermons, conference papers, as well as individual book preparations, there is a (mainly non-Australian) outpouring of intense analysis on such subjects as the relationship of ecology and religion, the meaning of 'nature' and its 'other-ness' (or not), the concept of 'human dominion' in Genesis', environmentalist moral theology and ecological science, anthropocentrism and eco-centrism.

Meanwhile, Australians have taken up an impressive examination of the interior of the continent, the meaning of aboriginality, as well as the practical arts of land and food nurturing, and the interrogation of health dimensions of contemporary living, with considerable persistence.

Just one insight from a range of these multiplying, deeply analytical works will serve to illuminate the many explorations:

"At its most profound level, the ecological crisis is a spiritual crisis. It comes as an alienation from nature, our estrangement from the very ground from which human life, indeed, all of life, has emerged. Our civilization has built so many barriers against an attachment to the rest of nature: to the soil, to the incredible diversity of plants and animals, to the rocks, to the seas, and to the geological formations that comprise our landscapes. Most of us no longer have a sense of belonging to the earth, an experience of solidarity with plants and animals, such that we deeply desire for all forms of life to thrive along with us.' (Earth & Word, Classic Sermons on Saving the Planet, Edited by David Rhoads, Continuum, 2007, p.xiv)

Where were/are the Churches in considering/promulgating these new insights?

‘The theme of the (1991 WCC) Assembly was “Come Holy Spirit, Renew the Whole Creation.” After reporting Charles Birch, Collins comments: ‘In the Christian communities such issues are usually swept aside by seemingly more pressing anthropocentric issues, such as social justice and the liberation and development of the third world. This is exactly what happened at the Assembly in Canberra.’ (God’s Earth, op cit.)

And in his recent research thesis, Steve Douglas: ‘Despite the often strong rhetoric.....(C)onventional institutional and anthropocentric welfare concerns remain dominant.’ (Is ‘green’ religion the solution to the ecological crisis? A case study of mainstream religion in Australia, Ph.D. thesis, 2008).

I acknowledge any philosophical, practical and religious developments as a welcome awakening. They are a crucial phase in moving both environmentalists’ and religionists’ state of mind away from the predominant anthropocentric view that the rest of nature is simply there for man’s use and benefit and can therefore be exploited with minimal attention to wild places as tourist attractions.

But, it has to be said, most of all, these stirrings arise out of a deep sense of pending catastrophe *emanating from scientific research*, echoing Edward O. Wilson’s, ‘The Creation – An Appeal to Save Life on Earth’, (2006). Addressing himself as a secular humanist to an imaginary pastor of the American South, Wilson says: ‘Pastor, we need your help. The Creation - living Nature - is in deep trouble.’ Berry’s ‘lunar landscape’ beckons.

Or the even more immediate warning from NASA atmospheric head, and possibly the world’s leading climate scientist, James Hansen: ‘What is at stake? Warming so far, about two degrees Fahrenheit over land areas, seems almost innocuous, being less than day-to-day weather fluctuations. But more warming is already “in-the-pipeline”, delayed only by the great inertia of the world ocean. And climate is nearing dangerous tipping points. Elements of a ‘perfect storm”, a global cataclysm, are assembled.’ (‘Global Warming Twenty Years Later: Tipping Points Near’, Address to the US National Press Club, 23/6/08.)

Thus my point is that ‘little things’ expositions that I’ve described are sadly little in the sense that they hold minimal sway in the face of the juggernaut of the Mainstream agenda. And assessing action taken in furtherance of these policy positions of the Churches, there’s not much to show for leadership from that quarter.

So, no ‘big things’ so far to supersede Mainstream! Ever?

Personal experience since University

My fifty years of work experience has been from a different direction again to the ‘little things’ – the intellectual and practical expositions - that I’ve described above.

In brief detail, I familiarized myself with and talked on environment protection laws and assessment processes, accepting them as desirable but initially through a lawyer's eyes as a constraint on private development. Fairness of process was the main consideration. Nature conservation/preservation entered through the local treasures that I – through a turn to urban planning - became caught up with. The beauties and historical attractions of our surrounds: the Dandenongs, the Yarra and its valleys, the Mornington Peninsula, the Macedon Ranges, the hills to the south of Albury-Wodonga, the fertile areas of Werribee.

The political process, and I, were attempting to find resolution between economic mainstream concerns and the environment, largely in the name of ecologically sustainable development. 'How to strike a balance'.

Throughout this time, development and population growth and job creation *had* to continue. Eventually, I came to understand the process as 'the creep'. New residents, new families, slowly making their homes outwards and upwards, moving to and from their jobs, enjoying the fruits of shopping and trips to the sea or the country. All the time, 'the land retreated'.

(See my companion paper on the urban/metropolitan scene, available on request - moral@alphalink.com.au – or 03 9803 8216: 'But where will all the birds go?')

Was there any other way to see these developments?

Recent decades have seen my introduction to the significance of deep time perspectives, understanding notions of the land/nature/the wild and particularly Australia as a mega-diverse continent - and some inklings of the implications of this for human development.

Some of the inspiration for these perspectives came from: Mary E. White – ('After the Greening, the Browning of Australia', 'Listen our land is crying') with her comprehensive paleo- and bio-geographical works on the Australian landscape; Tim Winton – referring to a European landscape as a place where 'the land was long gone, the wildness was no longer even a memory' ('The Riders'); Peter Fisher ('...successive waves of immigrants to these shores stumbled upon an extraordinary entity, with stunning regional variations, unmatched in natural diversity, certainly in relation to the Europe from which most of the second contingent came.' ('A gift from before clocks kept time – It's time we focused on the Australia that's 45 million years old', Australian Financial Review, Fri Review, 5/4/02.))

Is there a meeting-point to conjoin the ‘little things’ in their confrontation with Mainstream?

I’d like to suggest a threefold framing of this issue that does not require a religious motivation, but that for those so inclined, would embrace such a disposition.

What are the elements of a truly responsive spirituality for religionists and non-religionists alike:

- a. continuing meditation on earth-human connections – earth’s deep-time history, notions of the wild and nature (with all the conceptual difficulties implied by those words) that surround and are in us
- b. moving our personal lives to all those actions of energy and water saving etc. that are daily paraded before us as virtuous.

And more: accepting the urgency to stabilise population numbers while making room for an increase in the numbers of refugees; modifying homes and travel behaviour while continuing to fight local air pollution; using our gardens as significant contributors to food production and urban forest expansion; taking seriously the threat of sea-level rise and storm-surge on coastal housing *and* infrastructure. In sum, to deal with a whole range of actions that can be taken so that our city populations contribute, as we expect country dwellers to do, to the injunction ‘to tread lightly on the earth’, ‘leading a frugal life’.

- c. commitment to effective action at political, corporate, social and organisational church levels. Val Plumwood (‘Environmental Culture – The ecological crisis of reason’, Routledge, 2002) deals with an obvious abhorrence we would have with the notion that the nation should be run by a ‘Council of Scientists’. But it would be fruitless to go too far into this debate: Was Australia a democracy during WW2’s state of emergency? Of course.

For signs of hope amongst us, three conditions suggest themselves for consideration :

Distilling a realistic basis for hope in our contemporary earth-stressed world, it would seem that we are looking for at least the following:

- a. A truthful (‘serious’ in one of Vin Buckley’s favourite admonitions) view of the state of the planet – its very dire state. Anything less means we are fooling ourselves, and could stymie the targeting of

effective commitment at personal, institutional, business and political levels for change;

- b. The articulation and sharing of an imagined future where these problems can be confronted;**
- c. Because human beings act in concert most effectively, drawing strength from others' efforts, learning to grow and modify our views through each other, we would gain hope from acting together to bring about this imagined future.**

We just might then see 'alternative big things grow'.

Len Puglisi. (Successively a solicitor, urban planner and environment writer.)