

## **How to rediscover the Good Life - in the face of Climate Change and Environmental Degradation**

### **A Summary**

Faced with the threat of climate change and general environmental degradation many of us have been willing to make small marginal changes to our energy consumption and use of resources. But the best scientific opinion suggests that the changes that are really required are on a scale bigger than most of us can contemplate – typically a 90% reduction in our use of fossil fuel based energy and an 80% reduction in our general consumption of non-renewable resources. No wonder that we either find the whole topic deeply depressing, or else escape into denial.

Technological possibilities certainly exist to address these problems. Together with better economic policies than we now have, they could make a substantial impact on the problem. But at the moment the indications are that governmental action will be too little too late; the necessary political will – which essentially means public opinion – does not yet exist.

So how is a Christian called to respond? Perhaps we simply have to **choose** to change our acquisitive, materialist lifestyle to a mode of living that is much less demanding of the earth's resources in general and of fossil fuels in particular. But even if we do so, will the earth not in any case be overwhelmed by the material aspirations and energy needs of the rest of the world – the people of China and India for example? Once again the temptation is to take refuge in despair, denial or even selfish disregard for the rest of mankind and for future generations to come.

What does theology have to offer? A number of theological commentaries have pointed to the repeated Biblical injunctions, starting with the account of creation in the book of Genesis, and continuing with the story of Noah and others, that mankind has a special place as steward of the created world. Other studies consider the doctrine that we are all created in the image of God and go on to ask what then does this tell us of the nature of mankind and in particular what characterizes a 'good (God-like) life' for us human beings? Certainly God is never portrayed in the Bible as an acquisitive consumer. As so often Archbishop Rowan Williams has an interesting contribution to make. In a profound [lecture given in 2009](#) he called for: 'a **reality check**, a rediscovery of our responsibility for the material world'. I would like to see this paper as part of this reality check.

What particularly interests me is that the outcome of such theological reflection broadly coincides with secular psychological studies of what makes for 'human flourishing' or happiness. Actually this coincidence should come as no surprise; studies in different disciplines, if conducted honestly and openly, can be expected to point to the same 'truth'. Broadly what these studies tell us is that to be happy, or to 'flourish', people need:

1. Basic material needs, food and shelter etc, in other words income up to a certain level;

2. To have close family and social relations and have a sense of living in a community with some security;
3. To be engaged in worthwhile work that is rewarding though not necessarily paid;
4. To be generous, engaged in activities that give of oneself to other people;
5. Some religious faith or spiritual life which confers a sense of meaning and purpose;

Since we are concerned here with material consumption, let us focus particularly on the first of these criteria, our material needs. One frequently cited conclusion of cross-country 'happiness studies' is that, broadly speaking, the happiness of a population rises with rising average per capita income levels up to a certain point – around USD 15,000 a year – but then flattens off. So the first, important (if perhaps obvious) conclusion is that once we reach a reasonable standard of living we don't need to be rich to be happy.

So for the richer countries there is little or no correlation between happiness and increasing income. In fact, other research suggests that for this group of countries a strong correlation exists between happiness and income equality – or, put the other way round, that the greater is the degree of income inequality the greater is the level of general unhappiness in a society. In fact the studies go rather further than this and suggest that countries with high income inequality suffer from much higher levels of a whole range of social ills, amounting even to social breakdown – including recidivism, morbidity, social distrust and so on. This is closely related to the second 'happiness' criterion in my list above. It is worth noting in passing that in all these correlations the US and the UK stand out as extreme cases of both income inequality and social breakdown.

What is happening here? With all the material wealth that we enjoy why do our societies not turn out to be happier – hardly more so than many countries in Latin America that have much lower income levels? Again you can come at this from different angles but all seem to point to the individualistic, materialist, consumerist nature of our societies and economies. So, for example, Tim Jackson, an economist, points to the role that 'novelty' plays in our society and indeed in keeping the economic treadmill going; we are constantly being driven by social, psychological, advertising and other pressures (including built-in obsolescence) to constantly desire new things and experiences. Charles Taylor, a (Catholic) social philosopher makes the same point in a different way. He argues that despite the secularism of our age, people are still hungry for salvation, to the extent that materialist consumption plays a similar role to that of organized religion in other societies. He writes: 'consumer culture perpetuates itself ... precisely because it succeeds so well at failure'.

My personal take on this derives from the insights of Ignatius of Loyola and in particular his teaching on discernment between good and evil. What is happening here is that in our materialist consumption we are worshipping a false god. We can know that this is a false god, because it offers only brief satisfaction before being followed by desolation and the renewed desire for more. Moreover, in all sorts of subtle ways this false god turns us in

on ourselves as ‘individual’ consumers and away from the community of others. In fact some liberation theologians, steeped in the Ignatian tradition, would go further. Thus Ignacio Ellacuria, who was murdered/martyred in El Salvador in 1989, developed the idea of ‘the civilisation of poverty’. By this I think he intended, not so much to idealise poverty, but to stress that poor people by virtue of their solidarity have easier access to the Good News than do the rich.

Ignatius stressed that recognising and acknowledging our addiction to a false god is the first step to breaking the habit – as Alcoholics Anonymous demonstrates. Furthermore, and most importantly, if the over-consumption of the world’s resources is a false god, then there is nothing **inevitable** about it at all. False gods can be overcome. Mankind as a whole and future generations are not pre-destined to be prey to the same addiction as we have. There is still hope for the world.

If we take all this seriously then we can seek human fulfilment without needing more ‘stuff’ - indeed with less ‘stuff’. In economic terms that would imply moving to a zero growth economy, at least for those economies that have reached a satisfactory standard of material prosperity. For others, what we like to call ‘developing countries’, economic growth still has a role to play until their peoples reach acceptable levels of average income.

A zero growth economy does not imply a static economy with no investment or technical change. On the contrary rather high levels of investment will be required to move away from an economy dependent on fossil fuels. However it would be more of a ‘repair’ rather than ‘replace’ economy. And employment would likely fall. So one of the challenges would be to find satisfactory new ways of distributing national income among people without necessarily involving paid employment. I think that politicians have, so far, been unable to contemplate such a zero growth economy partly because ‘full employment’ is perceived as necessary to provide people with income to live – even though many of the jobs that people have to do are frankly ‘worthless’ rather than ‘worthwhile’.

Although none of this has yet penetrated into mainstream political discourse, I believe there are many straws in the wind that people are beginning to ask again: what are we here for and does this materialistic consumerist lifestyle actually add to our welfare? It is interesting to note that both France and Britain are looking into collecting statistics on measures of well-being, or ‘happiness’ as a complement to the GDP statistics that have hitherto been so central to economic policy for so long.

Yet it is too easy simply to prescribe what ‘they’, the government and politicians, should do. But what should **we** do – I mean after we have turned down our central heating, added more insulation to the house, reduced our consumption of beef and bottled water, and taken a few journeys by public transport? What is the Christian response here? If my conclusions are correct, then it should be essentially the same as that of everyone else. Our acquisitive, consumerist lifestyle is not necessary for our well-being and happiness and indeed is damaging to both us and to our communities.

But there is something more. For one thing there is the neglected virtue of Hope. Hope is not just optimism, or Micawberism, but rather a gift of the Divine. But, as with all such gifts, it does require our co-operation in the nitty-gritty of life. Perhaps the words of Rabbi Abraham Herschel are particularly apposite here:

Religion in our time has become weak and tame. At best it provides comfort, but very little challenge; it offers rituals and doctrines but little depth of experience, and almost no sense of the power of the divine breaking in and transforming human life.

It was not always so. You only have to read the Acts of the Apostles and notice the amazing energy and vitality of that earliest Christian community. Simon Norcross in his paper makes a similar point about the effectiveness of small Christian communities in the abolition of the slave trade.

In short, Christians, sustained by Faith and Hope, are gifted – let us say ‘graced’ - to act **together**, to notice and then change, beginning in small ways, the society in which they find themselves. The New Testament is full of allusions to Christians as community, indeed as the body of Christ, with each of us called on to play a particular role.

Let me finish with another quote from [Archbishop Williams’ 2009 lecture](#):

Without some rethinking of our current obsession with growth in consumerist terms, we can be sure of two things: inequality will not be addressed (and so the powerlessness of the majority of the world’s population will remain as it is at the moment); and the dehumanising effects of the culture of consumer growth will worsen. Only if we start thinking along these lines can we see our way through the difficulties often referred to about holding together the imperatives of environmental care and economic development. ....

The apparently small-scale action that changes personal habits and local possibilities is so crucial. When we believe in transformation at the local and personal level, we are laying the surest foundations for change at the national and international level. They are not two alternative paths but aspects of one essential impulse, the restoration of a healthy relation with our world.

Stephen McCarthy  
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## **Annotated Bibliography**

*Sustainable Energy – without the hot air*, David JC MacKay, 2009. Written by a Cambridge professor of Physics, this book is an absolute gem among all the dross on this subject. You can buy it or download it for free on the internet.

*The Vanishing Face of Gaia; A Final Warning*, James Lovelock, 2009. A deeply pessimistic account of the consequences of climate change by one of the most imaginative and brilliant scientists of our time.

*Happiness; Lessons from a New Science*, Richard Layard, 2005. An overview by a distinguished but somewhat disillusioned economist.

*Prosperity Without Growth; Economics for a Finite Planet*, Tim Jackson, 2009. The best text I have found on sustainable economics and zero growth economies.

*The Spirit Level; Why Equality is Better for Everyone*, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, 2009. The title says it all, numerous cross-country illustrations of the link between income inequality and various social ills.

*The New Economics; A Bigger Picture*, David Boyle and Andrew Simms, 2009. A critique of current economic policies and structures, more focused on smaller scale economies than on sustainable economies, but there is considerable overlap between the two approaches.

*A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor, 2007. A study of the rise of secularism in which Taylor argues that this is a much more complex, and indeed spiritual, phenomenon than we commonly suppose. An important book which won the Templeton Prize in 2007, but a bit of a brick at eight hundred pages.

*The Eye of the Needle*, Jon Sobrino, 2008. An extended theological essay on the immorality of the present distribution of income and resources across the world, by one of the leading liberation theologians, following in the footsteps of Ignacio Ellacuria.

*Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress*, 2009. A high level Commission, including two Nobel Prize winning economists, set up by President Sarkozy, to consider other measures of well-being apart from GDP. It can be downloaded in English here: [http://www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr/documents/rapport\\_anglais.pdf](http://www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr/documents/rapport_anglais.pdf)