

AUSTRALIAN RELIGIOUS RESPONSE TO CLIMATE CHANGE

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Theological Position Paper for Multi-faith Delegations, June 2nd 2011 prepared by Bishop George Browning in consultation with other members of the multi-faith ARRCC Religious Leaders Working Group.

THERE ARE ominous signs that the world order that we have known and relied upon in the past is changing.¹ Ecological systems worldwide are under very considerable strain and, in worst cases, are collapsing. Climatologists confirm that the increasing release of greenhouse gases (GHG) is leading the world on a dangerous path of global warming and consequent climate change.²

The changes are also building a growing inequity between human beings, and an inequity between humans and non-human creation. History tells us that unattended inequity is likely to produce a violent correction.

The last twelve months have witnessed extreme weather events, fires in Russia, floods in Pakistan, Brazil and Australia, ongoing droughts in Africa and extreme cold in parts of North America and Europe. While none of these events can be said to be specifically caused by global warming, science has consistently predicted that warming increases the intensity and frequency of such events. Recent research is beginning to confirm that global warming significantly contributed to particular instances of extreme weather.³

The year 2010 recorded the second hottest mean global temperature, while eight of the hottest years recorded have occurred since

the year 2000.⁴ Local government authorities now face the prospect of uninsurable property and, following disaster, all authorities face the prospect of bankrupting litigation.

It is therefore clear that underlying principles of human engagement and cooperation must change, but how are they to change?

Common to all faiths is teaching that life is relational, that human beings, while having the responsibility to care for creation, are also part of it. Humanity's health is directly related to the health of the whole created order. The Moslem faith, for example, holds that the relationship between man and nature should be like that of a just ruler and his subjects. Abuse of his power shifts him from being a ruler to a tyrant. The end result of man's tyranny over nature is nature's revolt against the tyrant, as is happening now.

This tyranny is not historically new, but three factors are new and their combined impact has turned the present moment into one of crisis:

1. Since the commencement of the industrial revolution the capacity of humanity to exploit creation through technology has grown exponentially. Technology enables humanity to impact the created order in ways that accentuate inequity between humans and the very sources of life upon which we all depend. In

addition, while technology has the potential to advance all humanity, the increasing tendency towards ownership and privatisation of even that which really belongs to the 'common wealth'⁵ has in fact accentuated inequity between human beings.

2. The global human population at the time of Christ was estimated to be 200 million; at around 1800 it was 600 million; currently it is around 6.9 billion.⁶ Clearly environmental poverty and human poverty are linked. When local ecologies become degraded, human poverty becomes more desperate, which in turn adversely affects ecological health. We also know that population growth is slowed by educational development and the reduction of poverty.⁷

3. As standards of living increase, every human being uses an increased proportion of available resources. Resources are finite in two respects. First, there is only a certain amount of oil to be extracted and only a certain amount of fresh water available for human need and the retention of healthy river systems. Secondly, only a certain amount of grain can be grown every year. If extreme weather events reduce, or destroy, expected yields, there is a time lag between the immediate pressures of hunger and the next cycle of production. Many global food stocks are now at their lowest level for decades, increasing prices and contributing to civil unrest. It is estimated that exploitation of the non-human creation to feed the human appetite is now running at an annual, compounding, 140%,⁸ escalating our debt to the future. With fiscal pressures on governments today it is easier to postpone any commitment to meeting the real environmental costs of production.

Many respected voices, of whom Lord Reece⁹ is one, say: it cannot be taken for granted that humanity will journey towards the end of this century without reaching a point where adaptive choice has been so reduced that life as we know it for billions has become impossible.

In the light of this summary situation, we



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the members of Australia's faith communities have two responses.

First we want to argue that this is essentially a moral issue.

We human beings have no future on this planet if our moral sensibility remains too limited, if we continue to act in our short-term, narrow self-interest, and fail to develop a broader awareness of our well-being being intimately connected with the health of our environment. It is our disconnection from the environment and from each other which has led us to act in ways that have caused untold harm.

1. *It is a moral issue because while the potentially detrimental outcomes of climate change most severely impact the poor; it is the prosperous who most significantly contribute to the cause through a more significant carbon footprint.*¹⁰ It is the responsibility of the world's prosperous to do two things:

a) Through commitment to the millennium development goals, peoples of the developed world must work to reduce the growing disparity between rich and poor.

While Faith communities applaud the Federal Government's commitment to increase its overseas aid commitment to 0.5% of Gross National Income we implore Australia, now arguably the most stable economic community in the OECD, to increase its commitment to at least the international standard of 0.7%.

b) The prosperous must also meet the costs of developing countries' need for adaptation and at a scale which is adequate to meet the

needs. This should be additional to overseas development assistance. Australia's 'fair share' internationally would be in the order of billions of dollars annually. Australia's current contribution is a small fraction of its fair share of internationally agreed estimates of the need, and it comes out of our overseas aid budget. This is not unacceptable.

Furthermore, the ways funds are spent should be guided by the judgement of those in developing countries who have an informed understanding of what is appropriate in their own context.

2. *It is a moral issue because outcomes that arise from choices in the present reduce choices for future generations.* We, members of faith communities have always understood we are all inheritors of the contribution that others have made before us and we affect the options available to those who follow us. It is quite unsatisfactory to expect further technological invention to substitute for responsible action in the present. We urge society to have a grandchild mentality, that is to say, a way of thinking that weighs choices in the present against their potential cost to future generations. We urge politicians to provide leadership and not to be swayed by members of society who appear dedicated to their own short-term advantage.

3. *It is a moral issue in that how human beings relate to the rest of the created order bears testimony to the inner integrity of humanity itself.* If humanity can easily watch the disappearance of other species without feeling the cost, if diversity is diminished without grief, then humanity as a moral species has already been severely diminished.¹¹ We in the faith communities do not argue for the care of the natural order at the expense of humanity's needs, but rather for an appropriate balance. The *Qur'an* confirms the perfect balance within nature: 'And the earth We have spread out (like a carpet); set thereon mountains firm and immovable; and produced therein all kinds of things in due balance.' 15: 19. We argue that a way forward must be found in which

humanity flourishes because creation retains its healthy equilibrium.

This brings us to our second response—the human vocation.

In his sermon in the Copenhagen Cathedral prior to the 2010 global conference, Rowan Williams¹² said we do not have an environmental crisis so much as a crisis of the human vocation.¹³ Has humanity reached its fullest potential when we stand above in a position of power, control and exploitation or when we stand beside, as a partner in service of the common good? While the former proposition in the human domain is decried as wrong, undemocratic and abusive, it has become the accepted model of behaviour in relation to creation.

Our faith communities hold in common an understanding that human beings are vocationally called to be carers of creation. In some faiths we see this vocation as being in partnership with the Creator.

We also contend that in the complexities of life we human beings need to develop sound priorities in our human affairs. For example, most people accept the priority of care for family over against increased status or salary. We want to question the priority that has been given to economic growth above all other priorities. We note that while tragically there are many who are genuinely poor in Australia, equally there are many who are in fact finding it hard to pay mortgages on very large houses and to pay off a glut of consumer goods. Australian housing has the highest *per capita* floor space of any nation on earth. At the same time social analysis indicates unacceptably high levels of loneliness, mental ill-health and lifestyle diseases.

Unlimited economic 'growth' should not be attributed such importance but, rather, 'human and ecological well-being'. It would be much better if prosperity could be measured in levels of community cohesion, social equity, work/life balance, job satisfaction, rates of physical and mental health; and the quality

and integrity of our environment. On this basis, more value would be placed on the substantial societal contributions of parents nurturing children, along with carers and volunteers.

Moreover, such a change will require us to revise the key factors that currently drive economic growth, such as the pursuit of labour productivity, so that we are no longer locked into an economy that must grow in order to be stable. Research and development of macro-economics for a post-growth economy is required.¹⁴

We note with sadness the primacy that is given to the individual at the expense of communities, both human and non-human. We accept as fundamental the defence of individual rights, but we argue that this is only part of the story: communities also have rights, the world's poor and marginalised have rights, those yet to be born have rights and the whole created order has the right to its own integrity.

We believe that a myriad of different strategies to reduce GHG in the atmosphere are important: public investment in renewable energy, stronger mandatory energy efficiency standards and incentives such as gross feed-in tariffs for energy-generation from renewable sources. However we acknowledge that one policy in particular is the current focus of the political community, namely some kind of price on carbon. We hold that the architecture of a carbon price must ensure that the transition takes place in the shortest possible time frame from dependency on fossil fuels to an embracing of renewable energy. In whatever way the mechanism is designed, flexibility

must be created so that Australia's pollution can be reduced well beyond our current low targets, in response to scientific and international developments.

There should be no granting of free permits. Transitional protection for so-called trade-exposed, carbon intensive industries should be kept minimal. They should be phased out quickly. Furthermore, the pricing mechanism must be designed so emissions are actually reduced within Australia, and they are not outsourced to developing countries through an off-shore carbon credit system.

Finally, the Government should guarantee support for affected workers to transition to other forms of employment, and low income households should be provided with subsidies to prevent undue hardship.

We are aware of the cost this imposes on large sections of Australian society; however the cost of not doing so could compromise the future of humanity itself. Australia has more to lose through climate change than any other OECD country, and the longer the cost is postponed the heavier the burden on our grandchildren.

The ecological limits of the Earth are not negotiable, and we treat responsible action in relation to these limits as 'unrealistic' at our own peril.

We, members of Australia's faith communities commit ourselves to the common good of all Australians present and future, believing that what is morally right will prove to be right for the sustainable future of global humanity within the context of the whole created order.

NOTES

1 'We will have to accommodate the fact that due to our own actions, Nature has turned against us and can no longer be relied upon to provide the conditions for the flourishing of life': Clive Hamilton, *Requiem for a species: why we resist the truth about climate change* (Allen & Unwin: Crows Nest, NSW, 2010), 210.

2 The Dutch Government issued a press release on

the 5 July 2010 confirming the core conclusions of the International Panel on Climate change (IPCC), conclusions that had come under very considerable criticism and which had emanated from the fourth assessment report of a potential 3000 scientists worldwide. On 23 June 2010 IPCC announced 831 scientists (from a 3000 pool of inter-related disciplines) will co-author the fifth assess-

ment report.

3 Seung-Ki Min et al, ‘Human contribution to more-intense precipitation extremes’, and Pardeep Pall et al, ‘Anthropogenic greenhouse gas contribution to flood risk in England and Wales in autumn 2000’, in *Nature*, (17 February, 2011).

4 <http://www.data.giss.nasa.gov/gistemp/graphs/> (accessed 4 February 2011)

5 Jeffrey Sachs *Common Wealth Economics for a crowded planet* 2009 (London Penguin Books)

6 <http://www.worldometers.info/population/> (Accessed 4 February 2011)

7 Australian Conservation Foundation eco-footprint calculator, using data from the Integrated Sustainability Analysis method developed by the ISA team at the University of Sydney and ACF.

8 *World footprint: do we fit on the planet?*, http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/world_footprint/ (accessed 4 October 2010).

9 Lord Reece is Britain’s Chief Scientist. His remarks were made during his 2010 lecture visit to Melbourne.

10 Australians are estimated to have the largest per

capita carbon footprint of any OECD country at approximately 24 tons per annum while many of the poorest in the world have a footprint of less than 1 ton. The Chinese footprint is approximately 5 tons per person

11 ‘Every form of life is unique, warranting respect regardless of its worth to man, and to accord other organisms such recognition, man must be guided by a moral code of practice’: *World Charter for Nature* (United Nations, 1982), <http://www.unep.org/law/PDF/UNEPEnv-LawGuide&PrincN05.pdf> (accessed 3 September 2010).

12 Archbishop of Canterbury

13 ‘Ask what would be a healthy and sustainable relationship with the world, a relationship that would in some way manifest both joy in and respect for the Earth’: Rowan Williams, *Sermon: Copenhagen Cathedral* (13 December 2009), <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/2728> (accessed 3 September 2010)

14 See *Prosperity Without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet*, by Tim Jackson, UK, 2009.

DECLARATION BY THE WORKING GROUP OF THE PONTIFICAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

We call on all people and nations to recognise the serious and potentially irreversible impacts of global warming caused by the anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases and other pollutants, and by changes in forests, wetlands, grasslands, and other land uses. We appeal to all nations to develop and implement, without delay, effective and fair policies to reduce the causes and impacts of climate change on communities and ecosystems, including mountain glaciers and their watersheds, aware that we all live in the same home. By acting now, in the spirit of common but differentiated responsibility, we accept our duty to one another and to the stewardship of a planet blessed with the gift of life.

We are committed to ensuring that all inhabitants of this planet receive their daily bread, fresh air to breathe and clean water to drink as we are aware that, if we want justice and peace, we must protect the habitat that sustains us. The believers among us ask God to grant us this wish.

(The working group consists of glaciologists, climate scientists, meteorologists, hydrologists, physicists, chemists, mountaineers, and lawyers organized by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences at the Vatican, to contemplate the observed retreat of the mountain glaciers, its causes and consequences. This report resulted from a workshop in April 2011 at the Vatican. }