Ethics *sans frontières*: the vocation of global citizenship.

(Rev Dr) Noel Preston AM, *BA, BD, M Ed*hons, *ThD*
The supreme challenge of the twenty-first century is to forge a global community which is both economically and environmentally sustainable and socially just. Against the background of an analysis of the crisis confronting life on Earth, the paper explores the idea of, and the need for, global ethics with particular reference to the Earth Charter, setting this in the context of the problematic quest for mechanisms of global governance. It will be argued that the multi-faceted ethical obligations posed by this challenge constitute a primary calling to global citizenship which requires not only a reformed political and economic vision but also an appropriate eco-spirituality to sustain global citizens confronting the challenges of a new era for the community of life on Earth.

Outline:

**Part One- Context and Questions**

The Crisis

Emerging Questions: is our current economic perspective too narrow to sustain the well-being of life? What economic approach will be best if we are to move toward eco-justice? Can capitalism be reframed, redefined, redirected and redeemed? What of globalisation and in what sense, if any, are we one world?

**Part Two- The Way Forward**

Three Propositions – (1) The ecological community is not subordinate to the human community; (2) The environment takes precedence over the human economy; (3) An altruistic response requires appropriate impartiality.

Global Ethics

Global Governance

Eco-Spirituality

The Vocation of Global Citizenship
Presenting this annual ACU lecture is indeed a daunting privilege for not only has it been delivered by predecessors of outstanding reputation but also it bears a most prestigious name – the Aquinas Lecture. At the outset then I honour St Thomas Aquinas whose mammoth legacy remains influential not only in the Roman Catholic tradition, but in the entire world of Christian theology and beyond; for, surely, Aquinas is one of the formative figures in Western culture.

There is one story about Aquinas which I first heard as a young Protestant who was never properly inducted into the *Summa Theologica* and other tomes of Thomas. Apparently on his death bed, seized by the audacity of a life devoted to explaining the mysteries of faith, he confessed his work was but ‘straw’. How accurate that story is I don’t know but it is a humbling reminder of the idolatry of the human intellect which lurks in academia especially when it is cloaked in religion.

I also welcome the contemporary revival of interest in Aristotelian Virtue theory which Thomas in his time made a central aspect of his work. Moreover, I identify with the essence of Thomas’ approach which is truly ‘catholic’ in the sense that it affirmed the possibility of a universal conversation based on human reason’s capacity and the necessity to explore the Law of Nature. Though the world Thomas knew, and the science which explained it, was more limited than ours, his interest in the eternal verities couched within an openness to knowledge as he worked at the University of Paris and various centres in Italy in the thirteenth century suggest to me that a twenty-first century Thomas Aquinas would welcome the idea of global citizenship.

I choose to believe that like a contemporary (though unofficial) Catholic theologian, Hans Kung, Thomas would embrace the exploration in recent times of global ethics, ethics without national, religious or ideological borders – an enterprise which is examined in tonight’s lecture. And moreover, I choose to accept the judgment of Matthew Fox, one of Thomas’ Dominican brothers – or at least he was when he wrote this – that Aquinas would be at home today with explorations in eco-theology which speak of the Cosmic Christ\(^1\). If so, then his blessing may be upon the inferences in tonight’s lecture about a spirituality which supports an ethic built around eco-justice. Certainly, Aquinas has provided us with a text which guides our way tonight, though the institutions which preserve his legacy have sometimes found it difficult to adhere to: “Whatever a man (*sic*) has in superabundance is owed, of natural right, to the poor for their sustenance.”\(^2\)

The title of this lecture actually points to its second part. However, we will first explore the challenging crisis to which global ethics and global citizenship are key responses.

**PART ONE - CONTEXT and QUESTIONS**

\(^1\) M Fox (1988), *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, Collins Dove, Melbourne, pp.114-6

When I was invited to give this lecture I approached the task as if this were the last lecture I would publish. In other words, I believe, the theme chosen uncovers the most important ethical message of our times. Two recent experiences influence this presumption. During the recent Brisbane Festival I was privileged to be part of the speakers’ group in the Earth Dialogues featuring the input of Mikhail Gorbachev and Green Cross International. Also, during this year I have had occasion to reflect on what a life’s vocation devoted to ethics, social justice and ordination to the ministry of Christ have amounted to, for as you may know I have published a memoir of sorts exploring themes of ethics, politics and spirituality and titled Beyond the Boundary. This lecture reflects the culminating insights of that project.

I speak from the vantage of a multi-layered identity, no longer content with being identified simply as a Christian or an Australian or even as a human being, though I am all that. As I see it, I am primarily a member of the community of Earth’s beings and my moral universe of responsibility extends to non-human beings and future generations. Therefore what I call eco-spirituality and eco-justice are lenses through which I must now see politics, economics, theology and indeed all my relationships.

In this perspective reality and ideal converge. Real politik must be taken seriously but hope must not be abandoned. Enlightened self-interest beckons us all to this perspective whether our starting point is speculative theology or philosophy or whether it is hard-headed commerce. In our time we are seized by a reality of exceedingly urgent, gigantic and apocalyptic proportions which confronts us as both promise and peril.

THE CRISIS

We do not have the luxury of time to debate the fate of the Earth. We must act now. There are still choices to be made but the options are narrowing especially for the most vulnerable in the community of Earth’s beings. The Genesis mandate that we, homo sapiens, are to have dominion over the Earth now haunts us in the guise of global warming, the threat to eco-systems and loss of biodiversity, depleting energy sources, a deepening water crisis, international security flashpoints, crimes against humanity, gross inequalities between and within nations, and absolute poverty and destitution facing 1.2 billion of a human population rushing toward 9 billion.3

The eloquence of John Carroll4 sums up our times: “Altogether we have been plunged into a sea of difficulty beyond our conception…What remains, on the brink of folly, is a hole of vast discomposure”.

---

3 There are many performance indicators that mark this crisis but let us just note two at this stage: Fact 1. more than half of the world’s original forest area has been lost and a third of what is left will be gone in 20 years at current rates of deforestation, to say nothing of the loss of species and biodiversity this represents; Fact 2. in the next hour more than 1000 children under the age of 5 will die from illnesses linked to poverty, half of them in Africa.(Porritt)

If one is looking for scientific credibility in these matters a sound source is the *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Report* published in 2005 after a four year study involving dozens of scientists all over the world assessing thousands of peer-reviewed papers covering the relationship between humans and the natural world. The disturbing conclusions of this report centre on the fact that about 60% of the ecosystem services examined are being degraded or used unsustainably affecting water quality, fisheries air quality and the regulation of hazards, pests and climatic factors – and that these changes have become alarmingly rapid in the past 50 years and are due overwhelmingly to the impacts of human beings whose numbers increase annually by 85 million – and further that the impacts of this degradation on natural systems fall disproportionately on the poor. The fact that this deterioration of the quality of life systems has become so pronounced in only the past 50 years is salutary, especially to someone like myself who was just commencing secondary school 50 years ago. By and large, my generation grew up when the air and the oceans were cleaner and when our diet was more organic and less processed – but this is not the case for our grandchildren, let alone for the millions of children who live in the shanty towns and favelas of Earth’s urban areas.

One of the human impacts is the proliferation of wars and militarist options to deal with conflict. War is manifestly bad not just for the humans caught in the conflict but also for the natural environment – and yet in a world crying out for investment in reducing poverty and saving the environment the annual global arms bill has risen to $1.4 trillion, with more than half of that spent by the United States alone, while the official aid and development budgets of all nations tops just $100 billion, a mere 7.5% of the budget devoted to the killing machinery of war.

And just how unequal is the human community? In the 1970s when I worked for Action for World Development we used to claim that one fifth of the world’s population controls four-fifths of the world’s resources. Thirty years later that is still roughly the case, though the ratio of income differential between the very poor and people like us has actually doubled in that time. In between is a group of 3-4 billion who may be described as “the managing poor”. An underclass of between 1 and 2 billions live each day on the brink of absolute destitution on less than we would pay for a cup of coffee. In such critical conditions people do terrible things to survive, as a World Vision mail-out told me recently. Families sift through garbage for old corncobs, the food for pigs. Others strip bark from trees, grind it and eat sawdust just

---

5 Of course there are occasional voices who decry the suggestion that the Earth and its community is in serious crisis, and they usually get an exaggerated space in the popular media. By and large they can and should be discounted as illustrated by the shocking case of Bjorn Lomborg who created a furore with his book *The Skeptical Environmentalist* published in 2001. Our Murdoch dominated media feted his opinions but overlooked how discredited Lomborg was when the Danish Committee on Scientific Dishonesty concluded that his work was “clearly contrary to the standards of good scientific practice” and deemed it “to fall within the concept of scientific dishonesty”. (Porritt, p.199)

6 Porritt p6-7

7 The response to the 3000 deaths in the Twin Towers on 9/11 largely explains the colossal recent escalations in military expenditure, but a fraction of this distorted response which implicitly values lives of western citizens more than that of African citizens, would have saved the lives of the estimated 24,000 who died of hunger elsewhere in the world on that September 11, 2001. As James Wolfensohn, then president of the World Bank, said: “The idea that a rich world and a poor world can co-exist without dramatic implications collapsed along with the Twin Towers on 11 September.”
to feel full. Alongside this description in the pamphlet is a photo of 7 year old Munneranji of Malawi, too weak from hunger to stand up, her father dead and her mother despairing that she can be saved.

Of course the picture is more complex than these statistics convey, and part of that complexity is that the inequity gulf is in evidence within nations as well as between them. There are ghettos of gross poverty in the most affluent nations while there are rich elites in most of the poorer nations. Australia is not exempt from this generalization while in the United States the top 1% of Americans (including some fine philanthropists) now earn more than the bottom 95% - and the overall trend is that the rich are getting richer even if in some economies the claim that the lot of the poor is improving is valid. Indeed it is the inequality gap which is generally not improving that signals injustices within and between societies, which is unconscionable and a hallmark of an exploitative economic system damaging the natural environment as well. Indeed, notwithstanding these disparities collectively our global consumption of resources is 1.23 of our ecological footprint, that is we humans are already using one and a quarter planet Earths, 23% more than the ecosystems can sustain.

In fact I haven’t yet named the most horrific and potentially calamitous aspect of the crisis confronting the community of life on Earth. That is climate change, or climate chaos as some are starting to call this phenomenon which is all embracing in its consequences.

The anecdotal evidence is all around us – protracted droughts, hottest days on record, 30 % more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere than before the industrial revolution increased levels of CO2 in the oceans, the Arctic and Antarctic ice-sheets decreasing by 9% per decade, changed patterns of migration by a range of bird species, the vineyards of Europe and California dying. And the scientific measurements are incontrovertible. The Earth’s climate is projected to warm by an additional 1.4 – 5.8 degrees Celsius between 1990 and 2100 and there is compelling evidence that most warming observed in the last 50 years can be attributed to human activity. The consequences are almost unthinkable and the worst effects will be visited on the most vulnerable inhabitants of the Earth community, human and non-human. And yet it is the affluent societies who are overwhelmingly responsible for the greenhouse gas emissions (carbon dioxide, methane and sulphur) which are the major cause of climate change. With only 15% of the world’s population, OECD countries are responsible for 75 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions8. As you may know Australia has just edged out the USA as the world’s largest per capita greenhouse gas emitter producing a little over 1.3% of greenhouse gases though we only have .03% of global population9.

While it is difficult to predict all the consequences of this trend, international studies10 using computer modelling present some scary scenarios. They strongly suggest the application of the “precautionary principle”, that is we should take the precaution of acting as if the worst outcomes were likely. Predictions include devastation of the Australian wheat crop, huge losses of plant and animal species and costly, regular damaging storms in some areas. The most alarming aspect of these predictions is that

---

8 Fiona Curtinpp27ff
9 Presentation by Dennis Jones of Griffith University, 10/8/06, at QCT seminar on Climate Change
10 like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Taskforce, or FOE papers and Dennis Jones presentation
even if we succeed in reducing greenhouse emissions significantly over a period of time we cannot avoid some of these effects. Obviously sea levels will rise.\textsuperscript{11} That of course means that for many island nations in the Pacific or in those many parts of Bangladesh, Indonesia and elsewhere in Asia where the poor live at sea level, millions and millions will be displaced. In fact even if measures are taken to cut greenhouse emissions more drastically than the Kyoto protocol predicts over the next decades there could well be 100 million climate change refugees. It boggles the mind to contemplate how many floating prison hulks John Howard and his ilk will need, because Australian Law and even UN conventions apparently have no provision for environmental refugees.

The flip side of the Climate Change issue is energy policy. Petrol bowser inflation is one reminder of the fact that petroleum production, or relatively cheap petrol anyway, has peaked.\textsuperscript{12} But we don’t seem to have an energy policy in this country or certainly not one to meet these times. Currently Australia has a target to produce 2\% only of energy from renewable sources like solar, biomass and wind power. Friends of the Earth say that goal should be 10\% by 2010, 20\% by 2020 and so on. Scientists at the Earth Dialogues claimed it is possible in this wide brown land of Australia to meet all our energy needs from solar power.

Peter Beattie is putting his faith in Geosequestration to make clean coal – but he would wouldn’t he – certainly unless the people start saying “No”. If (according to industry scientists on the ABC program \textit{Catalyst}) that is not a pipe dream it’s not a solution for nearly twenty more years, far too late. (Perhaps the Premier should listen to his own words on this one. Early in the current State election his offhand dismissal of worthy carbon tax and trading proposals was: “I refuse to support projects which sound good but produce bugger all”).

Of course a one country policy is not enough – the polluted atmosphere knows no national boundaries. That, so we are told, is why Australians as global citizens presumably need to re-debate the option of the nuclear fuel cycle and with that our alleged responsibility to open our uranium reserves further to the world. Putting aside cost considerations which are not incidental, the assumption, which I will let go unchallenged at the moment, is that nuclear energy and its attendant problems from waste management to weapons production, is without environmental problems, or at least, problems that are minimal compared with the need to deal with global warming.

Personally I am not convinced, though I don’t intend to examine the matter here. However there is one relevant aspect to canvass. The case being mounted by those who advocate that Australia becomes more involved in the nuclear fuel cycle is based on the ground that global warming is the determining factor, in other words it is a case clinched by environmental arguments. This is particularly interesting given the record of some of those mouthing this rationalisation. After all, the model normally driving industry policy is one that puts the economy in the driving seat while environmental matters are dealt with in a secondary manner. If our governments are moving to make

\textsuperscript{11} In fact I read Tim Flannery in the \textit{Sydney Morning Herald} on August 5 warning that anyone with a property with a sea view (I think he meant more or less at sea level) is not only likely to lose the view by the middle of this century but lose the property as well.

\textsuperscript{12} In 1985 the world consumed 60 million barrels of oil a day, with a further 10 million a day in reserve. Now we devour close to 85 million barrels a day, with only 1 to 2 million barrels as extra capacity.\textsuperscript{12} However, the greatest proportion of Greenhouse gases produced in Australia are from our coal-fired power stations (emissions from cars represents about 14\%).
the environment the key criteria in this instance why not do this across the board, not just in energy policy but in forestry management and agriculture and the rest. That thought suggests some related and emerging issues I now want to briefly name.

EMERGING QUESTIONS

The first is our continuing reliance on an economic perspective that is too narrow to sustain the well-being of life, including human life, on the planet.\textsuperscript{13}

The measurements we use as indices of how well things are going are far too inadequate. GDP (Gross Domestic Product) just doesn’t reveal what’s going on in terms of the constant trade-off between economic progress, environmental damage and social well-being. We need other measures\textsuperscript{14} – and there are suggestions around like the Index of Sustainable Welfare – and we need interventions in the pricing of goods and taxation measures which factor in the real costs to the ecology and quality of life – and there are suggestions around like the carbon tax. Wouldn’t it be refreshing if alongside, or instead of, the nightly news reports on the stock exchange and the so called market we had indices that indicate, for instance, how global deforestation, water and air quality, resettlement of refugees and measures to address diseases among the poor were going?

After all there is a massive constraint in our pathway to the future if it is to be characterised by eco-justice by which I mean a state where there is both environmental sustainability, ie. a just balance for all beings, and social justice, ie. a just balance in the whole human community.

The starting point for envisioning eco-justice is the evidence of a connection between inequalities and reduced opportunities among the Earth’s 6 billion humans on the one hand, and degradation of the biosphere and the natural environment on the other.

What economic approach then will be best if we are to move toward eco-justice?

Consider these facts:
We spoke earlier of the idea of an ecological footprint as a measure of our use of Earth’s biocapacity. During the past 50 years the footprint per person in rich countries increased by nearly 70% across this period (and we know that happened within those nations in a rather unequal fashion), and in developing countries the footprint grew by just 7%, one tenth as much. During the past fifty years, the rich, growth driven, essentially capitalist world has set a pattern of unsustainability that the rest of the world cannot possibly follow. According to Green Cross International\textsuperscript{15} if everyone in the world were to live at current European levels of consumption we would need 2.1 planet Earths. If everyone reached American levels of consumption we would require nearly five planets.

\textsuperscript{13} As Richard Reeves wrote in 2002:
\textit{The penny hasn’t dropped yet. Our cultures, political systems, yardsticks of success have utterly failed to adapt to the new world – one in which economics does not equal or even equate to progress. Governments remain as obsessed as ever with economic productivity and growth. No serious challenge has yet been mounted to the Enlightenment model of nationalist economic growth – a model that served us well for so long, but is now passed its sell-by date.}\textsuperscript{(Porritt p.309)}

\textsuperscript{14} see Porritt ch.13

\textsuperscript{15} Fiona Curtin, p 25
The conclusion is inescapable: it is unsustainable to aim at global social justice by replicating the use of natural resources and the lifestyle of the one-fifth affluent world. At the same time, it would be unjust to deny the poorer world the benefits societies like Australia have in abundance as a result of industrial-technological advances delivered substantially via growth-driven economies.

Consider the case of China as Lester Brown says (and remember there is also India):

*If China were to have a car in every garage, American style, it would need 80 million barrels of oil a day – more than the world currently produces. If paper consumption per person in China were to reach the US level, China would need more paper than the world produces. There go the world’s forests. If the fossil-based, automobile-centred, throwaway economic model will not work for China, it will not work for the other 3 billion people in the developing world – and it will not work for the rest of the world.*

The most benign scenario we can imagine would be if China and India develop different, cleaner technologies in conjunction with the rest of the world, especially for energy, and also if they do not mimic Western materialist culture in a wholesale fashion. But even with that scenario anything more than token steps toward eco-justice requires a radical rethink of capitalism as we know it.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall the conduct of governments and business around the globe has assumed that capitalism and the so called free market is the only game in town. The de-regulation of commerce and the diminution of government’s interventionist role has marked this period while the hope it has offered to the world’s poor is the mainly illusory proposition that a ‘trickle-down’ effect of ‘growing the economy’ will eliminate poverty. But how well has the trend to laissez-faire economics served the bulk of humanity as well as the needs of our eco-systems?

Of course capitalists may be progressive and enlightened. Some practice workplace democracy. Moreover there is a genuine awakening conscience to eco-justice in many corporations just as there are many very wealthy persons with a social conscience. Of course we must not repeat the ecologically disastrous implementation of communist command societies just as there is no question of simply reviving democratic socialism as it was conceived fifty years ago – and certainly human freedom and democracy matter as well as equality and sustainability, but who can deny the truth named by the author of *When Corporations Rule the World*, David Korten:

*The problem is this: a predatory global financial system, driven by the single imperative of making ever more money for those who already have lots of it, is rapidly*

---

17 One such is American George Soros, but listen to him:

*Although I have made a fortune on the financial markets, I now fear that the untrammelled intensification of laissez-faire capitalism and the spread of market values into all areas of life are endangering our open democratic society. The main enemy of the open society, I believe, is no longer the communist but the capitalist threat.* *(In The Atlantic Monthly, Vol 279 no. 2, 1997)*
depleting the real capital – the human, social, natural and even physical capital – upon which our well-being depends.

And as he goes on, this captures us all:
Pathology enters the economic system when money, once convenient as a means of facilitating commerce, comes to define the life purpose of individuals and society. The truly troubling part is that so many of us have become willing accomplices to what is best described as a war of money against life.\textsuperscript{18}

So, can capitalism be reframed, redefined, redirected and redeemed? \textsuperscript{19}Yes and No. Can a focus on the common good and the public interest co-exist with private property and entrepreneurship?

I concede that I am a layperson when it comes to economics. But dear old blind Freddy can see that the current market place and its cost structures has little if any space for factoring in environmental impacts, while its philosophical underpinnings and consumer marketing thrust is preoccupied with individualism at the expense of community. However while I don’t have the space here to repeat the full blown case that is made for reshaping capitalism, Jonathon Porritt’s account (in his \textit{Capitalism as if the world matters, 2006}) strikes me as plausible. His starting point is unmistakable: the current dominant model of capitalism is unsustainable and unjust. Nonetheless, in Porritt’s own words\textsuperscript{20}: The case for sustainable development must be as much about new opportunities for wealth creation as about outlawing irresponsible wealth creation; it must draw on a core of ideas and values that speaks directly to people’s desire for a higher quality of life, emphasizing enlightened self-interest and personal well-being of a different kind. Sustainable capitalism, he contends, has five dimensions: natural capital, human capital, social capital, as well as manufactured capital and financial capital. It is a model that goes beyond triple bottom line thinking and prevailing notions of corporate social responsibility\textsuperscript{21}, institutes fairer and better redistribution mechanisms and restores the role of government as regulator and guardian of redistribution and biodiversity. In a word it insists on an eco-justice framed market place.

Rightly, Porritt nominates that at the heart of the changes necessary new values must be embraced. He anticipates what I will develop in the second part of this paper that the most critical challenge is the creation of a new global culture, which will support eco-politics and eco-economics. The weakest aspect of Porritt’s presentation is that it fails to emphasise sufficiently how the move to ‘capitalism as if the world matters’ involves social and political struggle and will not happen without a significant price being paid by many. \textsuperscript{22}

This leads us to another question: what of globalisation and in what sense, if any, are we one world?

\textsuperscript{18}\textsuperscript{ quoted Porritt p 190
\textsuperscript{19} This has been the goal of recent extensive publications like Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins and Hunter Lovins’ \textit{Natural Capitalism}(1999) and Jonathon Porritt’s \textit{Capitalism as if the World Matters} (2006).
\textsuperscript{20}\textsuperscript{Porritt p 20
\textsuperscript{21}\textsuperscript{ For a fuller discussion on this point see Porritt pp.32-3 and102-3
\textsuperscript{22} After all, his vision is confronted by the juggernaut of globalisation manipulated often by those who subscribe to the earlier George Bush’s widely quoted ultimatum to the 1992 Rio Earth Summit: “the American way of life is not negotiable”.}
From one perspective there can be no doubt; the fundamental reality of existence is that planet Earth is home to the whole community of Life, and every part of that community is dependent on the whole. When you look at Earth from outer space you don’t see national boundaries or an economy, you see a fragile, unitary living whole. David Suzuki’s Declaration of Interdependence (1997) expresses this beautifully:  

_We are the Earth, through the plants and animals that nourish us. We are the rains and the oceans that flow through our veins. We are the breath of the forests of the land, and the plants of the sea. We are human animal, related to all other life as descendants of the firstborn cell._

This truth has been expressed in James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis which suggests that the Earth is best understood as one organic body, a biosphere in which all species of beings, animal and non-animal contribute to the whole. A consequence of this is that when any species undermines the whole that species puts itself at risk from Gaia’s over-riding will-to-life. There is a pertinent story relayed by Mikhail Gorbachev. “Two planets meet in space. One looks ill and complains of having contracted _homo sapiens_. The other, bursting with health, replies: “Don’t worry, my friend. I had the same illness, but it went away entirely of its own accord”.

The Gaia theory is a scientific observation that can be expressed mystically: all is one and one is all. Theologians might speculate that the doctrine of God reflects and embraces this monistic truth. Liturgies might express this poetically: _God is the heart, creation the heartbeat_. In his Letter from a Birmingham Jail almost fifty years ago Martin Luther King named the ethical implications of this:  

_We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever effects one directly, affects all._

So, the reality that we are one world confronts us especially in the various dimensions of the ecological crisis we have been surveying; but it also confronts us human beings in the phenomenon we call “globalisation”. This is a complex phenomenon. Sure, communications have minimised the tyranny of distance: the internet transcends boundaries and social constraints; cable TV increasingly means the audience for news programs or special events is truly and simultaneously global; millions of human beings live and work in several cities across the globe; response to crises have evoked a fellow feeling that exceeds filial connections as with the recent Asian tsunami or, in a sense, with the Kyoto Declaration’s response to climate change.

But the closer we look at this human construction, globalisation, the more we see division, conflict and difference. Globalisation as popularly understood and accepted by certain elites is essentially an expression of commercial interests who seek to operate in an international market-place as if national boundaries counted for nothing and as if the focus of cultural evolution were consumerism, which subverts the riches of cultural diversity. But as we moved from the late twentieth century to the new millennium the evidence mounted that the promise of globalism’s proponents had failed. Their belief was that, under the benign unilateral leadership of the United States and its acolytes, nation states were heading toward irrelevance, that economics and free trade, not politics or arms, would guide us to a future of prosperous markets and new technologies that would abolish poverty and spawn democracy. From a negative perspective the signs of the failure of this vision are manifold: the potential rivals to US hegemony are two nation states, India and China, then there are breakaway states and failed states, terrorism, the rise of xenophobia, the prevalence of
religious fundamentalism, the breakdowns in free trade negotiations, to say nothing of the lamentable absence of adequate mechanisms to address transnational eco-justice challenges.

John Ralston Saul argues along these lines in a recent book titled *The Collapse of globalism: and the reinvention of the world*. Saul’s emphasis is that the failure of globalisation as we have known it derives from its neglect of ideas of the public and common good and globalisation’s blind assumption that commerce and consumption alone will satisfy the human person and community. He does not propose the end of the global project nor does he predict the end of the global economy but he does see a rethinking of that project in light of “the other forces that increasingly set the pace today, from irregular warfare to NGOs to reinvigorated nation-states, from the reappearance of genocides and oligopolies and hidden forms of inflation to a new practical interest in ethics and positive forms of nationalism and a new interest in citizenship”.

So are we one world? Yes and No. When one world ideology fails to take account of diversity it is dangerous, when it fails to respond fully to the human spirit and the nature of life it is destructive and doomed. This is why it is both desirable and necessary that we move beyond the cold, technical and narrowly economic globalisation which sought to consume us in the late twentieth century. Only an eco-centric globalisation is viable, one that grounds us in our immediate context while expanding our awareness to a more ultimate reality. This is the context of what I will call the vocation of global citizenship which requires a sense of belonging to one world, of being a truly catholic (small ‘c’) human being, and rests ultimately on the essential unity which is to be found in the relationship of its parts to the reality of Gaia, indeed to something more, an even larger whole, sometimes named theologically as God.

This concludes our analysis of the state we are in.

**PART TWO- THE WAY FORWARD**

The implications of the analysis are unmistakable. In 2000 Pope John Paul II spelt out the key implication in an address to business and trade union leaders: “globalisation requires not only new rules and new institutions at a world level, but particularly a new culture.”

We are called to the project of creating a new culture, not a mono-culture or even a multi-culture but rather an eco-culture which takes seriously differences and values both unity and diversity. Thomas Berry calls this “The Great Work”, while David Korten calls it “The Great Turning” which he says “depends on awakening to deep truths long denied…and it…begins with a cultural and spiritual awakening…and…requires reframing the cultural stories by which we define our human nature, purpose and possibilities”.

However, creating culture is a process that is intergenerational composed of many, many dimensions which cannot be prescribed or pre-designed. Philosophical presumptions about what we believe about existence and what we value in how to live are central to culture formation. That is why Korten calls for a “spiritual awakening”

---

23 Saul p. 14
24 cited in N Preston Felix Arnott lecture
and Berry insists that we must “re-invent ethics” and Pope John Paul II spoke of the need for “ecological conversion”.

Nonetheless, students of culture underline the importance of language, discourse and conceptualisation in the imagining which is culture creating. So in the quest for a global eco-culture let us dare to have a conversation about an appropriate approach to ethics and spirituality. We begin by naming three propositions which govern the mindset we bring to this conversation.

Proposition I rejects the anthropocentrism that has infected mono-theistic religions including Christianity and western philosophy and ideologies including capitalism and communism in the past 500 years and affirms that *homo sapiens* is part of, not separate from, nature. We share not only DNA with other life forms but also a destiny bound up with theirs. As a consequence, in the words of Thomas Berry: *The ecological community is not subordinate to the human community. Nor is the ecological imperative derivative from human ethics. Rather, our human ethics are derivative from the ecological imperative. The basic ethical norm is the well-being of the comprehensive community and the attainment of human well-being within that community.*

Proposition 2 declares that the geo-biological functioning of the planet, ie. the environment, takes precedence over the human economy or, to use the words of Lester Brown: *Transforming our environmentally destructive economy into one that can sustain progress depends on a Copernican shift in our economic mindset, a recognition that the economy is part of the Earth’s ecosystem and can sustain progress only if it is restructured so that it is compatible with it.*

Proposition 3 speaks to the matter of moral motivation and enjoins us as ethical actors to adopt an appropriate impartiality when it comes to responding to the needs of our fellow beings, human and non-human. This perspective was once described as “taking the viewpoint of the universe”, that is adopting a moral stance which enables us to look beyond the interests of our ‘kith and kin’ or to see their interests as if they were our ‘kith and kin’. This is an injunction that should not jar for those formed by the Christian gospel centred as it is on the commandment to love and the question, “who is my neighbour?” Might it not be said that, in contrast to those who continued down the road to Jericho in obedience to their filial and vocational obligations, the Good Samaritan acted with appropriate impartiality by being a neighbour to a complete stranger.

This approach might be supplemented by an appeal to enlightened self-interest, though that may not persuade those who believe they are powerful enough to insulate themselves from the crisis; if they are grandparents they might be amenable to the argument of intergenerational justice (‘what kind of a world do you want for your grand-children’) but ultimately altruism’s justification is that it is the right thing to do. Proposition 3 is summed up thus: *When subjected to the test of impartial assessment, there are few strong grounds for giving preference to the interests of one’s fellow citizens, and none that can override the obligation that arises whenever we can, at little cost to ourselves, make an absolutely crucial difference to the wellbeing of*  

---

25 Berry p. 105  
26 quoted Porritt, p.135
another person in real need. This approach is challenging to individuals and nations in the context of the global inequality and ecological destruction we have been outlining. It speaks directly to commitments such as the UN Millennium Development Goals and Australia’s responsibility to do all we can to minimise the harmful effects of climate change.

GLOBAL ETHICS

I offer these three propositions as a prelude to the articulation of a global ethic. The quest for global ethics has taken several parallel pathways over the past twenty years. In international forums convened by bodies like UNESCO the quest has been encouraged. At a seminar organised by the International Catholic Movement for Intellectual and Cultural Affairs in 2000 Francine Fournier from UNESCO named the issue clearly:

The search for global ethics must be seen within the context of uncertainty, fragmentation, and ‘crisis’ in managing human well being. For many, the crisis in governance amidst the prevailing numerous problems is a crisis of certain ideas, belief and values that served as a foundation to the organisation of human communities in an era where problems were solved within the sphere of the nation state.

Another focal point for developing global ethics is the ecumenical conversations across religious boundaries especially under the leadership of progressive theologian Hans Kung who helped convene a world parliament of religions in Chicago in 1993 and in Capetown in 1999. These conferences have issued a global ethics statement emphasising the common values shared across different religions.

Of course some critics warn about problems associated with such a project. Some will rightly caution about the dangers of moralising in political processes while others observe that the consensus required to create a global ethics statement will result in bland aspirations that are of little practical assistance. At the end of the day the rigor of philosophical normative theory and the negotiations of politics will be necessary to apply the higher order principles of such a statement and clarify the inevitable disagreements which emerge when principle becomes policy to be enacted.

There is a related problem: the tension between respecting cultural diversity while seeking universality. This tension reflects the philosophical conversation between universalism and communitarianism in post-modern intellectual discourse. Certainly, in the name of universalism tyranny has flourished. So any global ethic statement needs to respect the deep plurality of humanity as well as the diversity of nature. But, I maintain that from an eco-centric perspective, it is beyond dispute that there are universal values which transcend particular traditions or social contexts.

The genesis of the Earth Charter was the Declaration of the Global Forum at the Rio Earth summit in 1992. For more than a decade, under the inspiration of many dedicated and gifted individuals, a process of consultation was pursued that was multi-national and cross-cultural, especially sensitive to the views of first nation peoples, continuing until this manifesto for eco-justice was launched at The Hague.

See Singer, p 197
Peace Palace in 2000. Its promoters hoped that it would be adopted by governments – a development that has been rather limited. In Australia for instance the House of Assembly in the ACT and the Melbourne City Council are two government bodies to have adopted it. Last year the Australian Senate passed a motion commending the Earth Charter as a tool to be used in the context of the UNESCO decade of Education for Sustainable Development while at the recent Earth Dialogues in Brisbane the Queensland Government announced that the Earth Charter would be incorporated in the school curriculum. The overall hope, which is still promoted by Green Cross International and also the World Conservation Union (IUCN), is that the Earth Charter will be adopted as a ‘soft law’ document at the United Nations where, according to its advocates it could be as significant a document as the UN Declaration of Human Rights.  

The fact is that the Earth Charter is a creed belonging not to governments but to the world’s people and it will be up to Non-Government Organisations of civil society to make it known and promote its adoption. This was made clear at the Rio plus 10 Conference in Johannesburg in 2002 where reference to the Earth Charter in the final communiqué of that body was blocked after intervention by the United States (although the final wording of the Political Declaration included phrases almost identical to the Earth Charter Preamble). Notwithstanding these setbacks the Earth Charter is being used to guide and inspire action toward sustainability around the world as the recent publication *The Earth Charter in Action* reveals.

Personally I first discovered the Earth Charter initiative in 1999 and its informative language and comprehensive nature seized me as an ethicist as a summary of ideas whose time had come. I sensed in the Charter the dialectic between utopian hope and grounded reality which is the territory my life’s work had focussed on. It documented something that had been forming within me across the years – perhaps since I wrote my doctoral thesis in 1972 where I attempted to reframe the idea of ‘national interest’ in terms of ‘international responsibility’. Moreover I sensed that its comprehensive approach meant that it had a lot to say to many constituencies, that it challenged the environment movement on the one hand and human rights activists on the other to be part of broader coalitions. As the preamble to the Earth Charter says: *We urgently need a shared vision of basic values to provide an ethical foundation for the emerging world community. Therefore, together in hope we affirm the following interdependent principles for a sustainable way of life as a common standard by which the conduct of all individuals, organizations, businesses, governments, and transnational institutions is to be guided and assessed.*

“*Amen Amen*” was my response. So I enlisted to the Earth Charter initiative and now regard it as the centre piece of my vision and commitment – though it is not an infallible encyclical and I do not deny that there should be room to quibble over some of its phrases. The three propositions previously enunciated are the vantage from which I understand it. The document is unmistakably eco-centric; “Respect Earth and life in all its diversity” is its first principle and the Preamble is clear: “The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence

---

28 Mikhail Gorbachev (p. 86-90), one of the main sponsors of the Earth Charter from the outset sees it as “a third pillar together with the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Charter” but he is under no illusion that the processes of the United Nations cannot be trusted to adopt the Charter as “an instruction book for action”.

for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature.”

There are sixteen main principles grouped in four sections: 1. Respect and care for the Community of Life 2. Biological integrity 3. Social and Economic Justice 4. Democracy, Non-violence and Peace. The sixteen principles are expanded to 61 clauses most of which are unmistakably challenging, for example 7f adopt lifestyles that emphasize the quality of life and material sufficiency in a finite world. These sub-principles invite the exploration of action-oriented axioms. For instance 7f, suggests to an individual, a government or even a body like a university, use of the ecological footprint to calculate an appropriate use of non-renewable resources according to the norm of eco-justice, so that our consumption remains within the Earth’s capacity.

To give living action to the Earth Charter as a transformative tool it must be supplemented by the cultivation of personal character around virtues that derive from our eco-centric nature, virtues like compassion, co-operativeness, intergenerational justice, proactive responsibility and stewardship. Also, the power of small groups, communities or organisations in society seeking to live out collectively the truth and hope of the Earth Charter cannot be denied. Then, to be given wider effect the Earth Charter Initiative requires skills of social analysis and political advocacy.

All this, in my view presumes a spirituality which sustains the vision and the staying power for maintaining a life-direction consistent with the vision in spite of the ambiguities of the human condition. The Earth Charter document itself recognises this. 14d. enjoin us to recognise the importance of moral and spiritual education for sustainable living, while in its elaboration of “the way forward” the document explicitly states that its challenge requires a change of mind and heart. Kamla Chowdhry, an Earth Charter Commissioner from India has proposed that the Earth Charter may be meditated upon like scripture, adding: “We need to weave the Earth Charter around our own living traditions, our values, and our concepts of sacredness and spirituality”.

I will return to this theme of shortly.

GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

But now I want to canvass the need for global governance. As a tool for fashioning an eco-centric global culture, the Earth Charter must be accompanied by the creation of global institutions that are faithful to its vision. What specifically are we talking about?

I need to be clear. I am not proposing ‘one world government’, that is neither feasible nor desirable. The 1995 Report, Our Global Neighbourhood, produced by the UN appointed Commission on Global Governance ruled this out but affirmed the goal of establishing global organisation that is values based, promotes sustainability while

29 In Earth Charter in Action, p.181
30 One thoughtful contribution to the discussion about global governance has come from Federal Labor MP, Duncan Kerr, who published a book in 2001 titled Elect the Ambassador – building democracy in a globalised world. It nominates ten proposals as steps toward global representative government.
conforming to the reality of global diversity. Because the crisis we confront transcends national boundaries it is urgent that we move in this direction, though since the Commission’s Report there have been many setbacks to directions that looked possible ten years ago. The shift in political discourse since September 11, 2001 marks the changed global mood. Since then we have seen strident American unilateralism, the pre-occupation with terrorism, a consequent reduction in civil liberties in many places, more severe border protection, and the seeming failure to reform the UN. However, at the same time the transnational role of civil society often around global campaigns, efforts to enhance transparency and accountability across national lines and the strengthening of regional blocs persist as signs that doomsaying is not necessarily the last word on global governance.

So what should be the global governance agenda? I am only able to sketch an indicative program here. Obviously it needs to start where we are. The initial steps include a revamped and enhanced United Nations’ Organisation. Experienced commentators like Mikhail Gorbachev recommend the expansion of the Security Council and its peace-keeping capacity to give permanent seats to more international actors like India. The further development of international law and Courts to supervise the observance of those laws is essential. Gorbachev proposes an international ecological court modelled on the Tribunal in The Hague while New Zealand law academics, Bosselmann and Taylor, have outlined the significant basis for improving international law that the Earth Charter provides.

If eco-justice and all that we have argued here is to be taken seriously then a key element of improved global governance will be a radical shift in the membership and orientation of current global economic forums. While the World Bank has taken steps to respond to global poverty and the World Economic Forum has opened its doors to critics, these bodies, and the IMF and the WTO, need to be reconstituted, revamped and renamed so that they serve the eco-economic vision. The financial incentives they apply need to line up with policies that serve the bigger goals of the international community such as the reduction of Greenhouse gas emissions and the achievement of the Millenium Development Goals. One of the most demanding items for these global eco-economic forums will be to encourage and establish policies which provide lasting redistributions of global resources and wealth, strategems which go beyond the necessary but preliminary measures of debt forgiveness and development aid. One commendable idea for a new global tax (which is supported by the Canadian government and also has some European support) is the so called Tobin Tax on the value of all foreign exchange transactions.

Measures such as progressive taxation, income transfers, subsidies, elimination of user fees for social services, public works programs and land reform within nations should be encouraged rather than discouraged as the IMF has done on occasions. Obviously global initiatives must be matched within nations and at the local level, facilitating eco-friendly cities and agriculture for instance.

The more difficult question is not so much the agenda but who will champion it? This is a task for statesmen and women, politicians who are interested in the well being of the next generation rather than their own well being after the next election. Where will

31 Kung p 223-4
32 Gorbachev p 62
33 Earth Charter in Action, p 171-3
we find far-sighted leaders, people of vision who sense the converging imperatives of our time and create the space where assumptions are challenged and new ideas surface? Globally, Mikhail Gorbachev seems to be one such. Others might emerge to pursue this agenda from the ranks of multilateral organisations or ex-Presidents and ex-Prime Ministers or enlightened retirees from global corporations as well as religious leaders, NGO spokespersons, academics and others from civil society.

We are actually talking about a re-visioned politics, that eschews the politics of fear, violence and greed with re-invented governments as the guardians of eco-justice rather than the mere managers of a growth driven economy. This eco-politics, centred on a convergence between environmental sustainability and a realistic understanding of well being, is founded on the nobility of human beings, a nobility derived not from domination over life on Earth but from humanity’s capacity for stewardship mandated by our species’ place of responsible dependence within the biosphere. Jonathon Porritt terms it a “politics of interdependence”.  

ECO-SPIRITUALITY

There is an unavoidable convergence between this political outlook and the cultivation of eco-spirituality. Porritt and others who parade no theological credentials have come to the conclusion that to overcome the seductions of consumerism and to be committed to a world of eco-justice, humanity must adopt a “more humble, reverential ethos” which will not happen “without some kind of spiritual support”.  

He cites scientist Fritjof Capra:

*Ultimately, deep ecological awareness is spiritual or religious awareness. When the concept of the human spirit is understood as the mode of consciousness in which the individual feels a sense of belonging, of connectedness, to the cosmos as a whole, it becomes clear that ecological awareness is spiritual in its deepest sense.*

Now, let us give some content to this eco-spirituality, though we need to acknowledge that a movement which gives birth to eco-spirituality is of necessity diverse, eclectic spanning generations. For those of us formed theologically and christologically there may be some significant theological reframing to do just as for those of us ecclesiastically connected there may be some reconfiguration of our allegiances. Much as I would love to, I do not intend to enter these realms here. My focus is eco-spirituality as practice and perspective.

The Universe Story (and especially the story of life) is the basic narrative. Particular stories within the human story like that of Jesus of Nazareth which inspire faith and action are to be shared in a deeply ecumenical way. Fundamentally this is a spirituality which arises out of reverence and awe for life in its unity, difference and connectedness, along with humble awareness of the grand but insignificant role we each play in the drama of life on Earth across generations spanning billions of years. The essence of that role, as principle 2 of the Earth Charter states is “care for the community of life with understanding, compassion and love”. Loving all things, all beings is the core of this spirituality as it was for St Francis of Assisi whose legend, as that great contemporary Franciscan Leonardo Boff reminds us, includes a beautiful story of the occasion when a weeping Francis addressed his Lord:

34 Porritt, p.319ff
35 Porritt p.300
36 cited Porritt p 300
37 Boff p. 214-5
I love the sun and the stars,  
I love Clare and her sisters,  
I love the human hearts  
And all beautiful things,  
Lord, forgive me  
For I should only love you.

The Lord smiled and replied:  
I love the sun and the stars,  
I love Clare and her sisters,  
I love the human hearts  
And all beautiful things,  
My dear Francis  
You need not weep  
For I also love all this.

This love is general but it is particularly particular. It requires us to be present to where we are and with whom we are, tending to our kin, our garden, our neighbourhood; it also invites us to let go, to divest our attachments and simplify the way we live; it also empowers us to address injustice and work for a more just community.

To sum up: eco-spirituality is centred on compassion which is all inclusive and empowering, drawing on wellsprings that are both contemplative and prophetic; it is a spirituality which challenges the illusions which easily capture us — that consumerism makes us happy or even that there is a god out there who will save us; it is also a spirituality which supports a focus on outcomes that are realistic and practical, even if they are sometimes less than ideal. In the quest for a balance that is in harmony with the Earth, eco-spirituality calls us to act justly, love all beings tenderly and walk humbly with the Spirit of life, sure in the faith that it is the meek who inherit the earth.

CONCLUSION: THE VOCATION OF GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

A profile of the vocation of global citizenship is implied in this entire discussion, as is the framework of the new culture. We have charted that ‘new project of civilisation’ first alluded to at the Rio Earth summit: a globally shared ethic of eco-justice, supported by eco-spirituality and issuing in mechanisms of global and local governance which facilitate eco-politics and eco-economics.

Some may claim that the second part of this paper has a utopian, speculative and idealistic ring about it. I make no apology for that, for the question I set out to address — how ought we live together as the community of life on Earth — must ultimately be answered in terms that are visionary and ethical — as is The Earth Charter.

---

38 Fromm quote from Beyond the Boundary, p.255-6
39 Preston, N, Felix Arnott Lecture 2002
40 This was the expression used by the Global Forum at the Rio Earth Summit according to Boff p 131
acknowledge that there are gaps in this presentation, there are unanswered questions, while some opinions might be debated. There may be other ways forward but the test is whether they are the ways of eco-justice. I insist that what to some sounds utopian, speculative and idealistic from the standpoint I have adopted is ultimately reasonable, essential and realistic.

The way forward which I have outlined is also the case for the vocation of global citizenship. Let me conclude by indicating what this calling is.

It has been said that there is one Earth but there is not one world.\textsuperscript{41} For the sake of the community of life on Earth we need to move toward being one world, that is being a global community. This imperative should not gloss over cultural differences; indeed the multicultural character of global citizenship is a point of enrichment. We will and must continue to organise our lives in local communities, nations and regions—as a complement to the global organisation of our life together.

Civitas and polis are two dimensional – global and local. In the words of the Earth Charter preamble: \textit{We are at once citizens of different nations and of one world in which the local and global are linked.}

You may recall the bumper sticker slogan: \textit{think globally, act locally}. What great wisdom that is. At times, but not always, what needs to be done locally will converge with global action, but what is non-negotiable in the twenty-first century is that our perspective, our worldview, our understanding must have global dimensions. Indeed our primary self-understanding or identity, the centring point of our multiple roles, ought therefore be that of a global citizen. I speak of our response as individuals although the character of global citizenship may also be expected of corporate actors. Indeed, as we grow the number of those who understand their identity profoundly as global citizens and try to act accordingly, the nation state and international commerce will experience the pressure to adapt.

Those who embrace this self-understanding and identity regard it as so critical that they receive it as vocation. The term ‘vocation’ literally means ‘calling’ and, though it should and does have wider applications, the idea is often linked to religious traditions. One has a vocation to enter the priesthood, or the convent, and so on; it involves adopting ‘a rule of life’ linking one’s destiny with a mission. Often that mission is lived out communally as a sign to the world around. Living according to a vocation is to live a purpose-filled and passionate life, bound in covenant with others who share the vocation. On this account those who have the vocation of global citizenship share the covenant detailed in the Earth Charter and their mission is to be “the salt of the Earth”.

Because this vocation cannot be anthropocentric in its orientation, linking ‘citizenship’ with vocation may jar, for only human beings can be citizens. As global citizens we are representatives and stewards of all life including non-human beings. Indeed, we might adapt a wise caution of Adam Smith generations ago: “he is certainly not a good citizen who does not wish to promote, by every means in his (sic) power the welfare of the whole society of his fellow citizens”\textsuperscript{42} The adaptation

\textsuperscript{41} Brundtland Commission report, \textit{Our Common Future}, p.27
\textsuperscript{42} cited by Saul p 280
consists in the fact that, to the global citizen the whole society and the common good is inclusive of all life on the planet.

Moreover, the global citizen’s identity and role is premised on the three propositions we spoke of earlier: she recognises that she is part of a greater and interdependent web of life and living beings transcending generations; she lives by a political economy which places the need to sustain life and conserve natural resources at its centre; and she is capable of appropriate impartiality ready to share with the most vulnerable even if they are beyond one’s personal circle.

Of course when global citizens act to make a difference they are likely to pay a price – in societies like ours not just as consumers who deliberately try to lessen their ecological footprint but also they may pay a penalty for daring to resist a culture that emanates from different values. Their reward is a sense of well-being and the satisfaction of making a worthwhile contribution to future generations.

Finally then, the global citizen is an informed and responsible activist on behalf of life – and we may be encouraged that, even though it remains a minority movement, such activity is gathering momentum, expressed generally through what we call ‘civil society’, people who are making choices and changes away from conventional careers, government and economics.

The Earth Charter and like statements are the creeds guiding thousands of projects and millions of adherents. For instance ethical consumerism and ethical investing is growing; across 15 years from the early 1980s the number of NGOs registered by the OECD as providers of aid in so called developing countries doubled to 3000. Around the globe there are millions of dedicated global citizens acting to build a better world – volunteers in perilous situations of human need, defenders of endangered forests or species, full-time peace activists, and professional medics, teachers, lawyers and so on using their expertise for the disadvantaged.

Global citizenship is a reality both as a mindset and a daily practice. Global citizens are a sign that despair cannot obliterate the life force which is our ultimate ground of hope. Though the forces of darkness seem to surround us, global citizens know it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness and they act, with courage and trust that the darkness will not overcome the light.
A Post Script – what can the individual do?

From Beyond the Boundary pps.304-306

We each have a choice: to act on this reality with hope for a better world or to be passive as we despair that things can ever improve. Ultimately the choice to hope requires faith and is an expression of love. Even when we feel that we are hoping against hope, the choice remains, for the game is not up until the final cards are played. If we look at the big picture of history there is much evidence of remarkable and hopeful transformation. The future is an infinite succession of present moments, and to live in hope today, in defiance of evil around us, is itself a marvellous victory for hope.

And yet there is a reasonable question I have been constantly asked: “In the face of overwhelming odds, what can an individual do to promote changes toward a more just world?” When I hear that, I first have a passing thought (of compassion I trust): perhaps we should not expect too much of each other. And then I recall a more demanding edict planted in my memory from a very early age: “All it takes for evil to triumph is for good men (sic) to do nothing!” So I want to be more helpful to my enquirer. When I first worked with Action for World Development I first designed a six step formula as a response to that query. Slightly updated it reads:

The individual can
(1) Become informed,
(2) Inform others and connect with them for mutual support,
(3) Cultivate a spirituality of eco-justice which nurtures visionary compassion,
(4) Support, financially or in kind, programs that empower the poorest,
(5) Review and change lifestyle so that it has a less harmful impact on others and the environment,
(6) Act politically, for example, through non-government organisations working for human rights and the environment, while using our vote to support the Earth’s future.

The last of these points is critical because, while it is necessary that we do something as individuals, the big changes that are needed are systemic changes, changes to the legal, political, economic and cultural forces which oppress many and benefit a few. As I look through this six point list I am conscious that I have adhered to them imperfectly, just as I recall many I have known who have acted on this agenda with more courage, faithfulness and sacrifice than I have. This recollection serves to remind me once again how dependent on grace we all are. I take some comfort and inspiration in the words of Colin Morris, a religious leader and author who worked in Southern Africa more than thirty years ago: “The best that most of us can do is to take hold of the near edge of some great problem and act at cost to ourselves”.


“We are all responsible. We have drunk in the excess and indulged in the comfort. Equally, we are the heirs of a long and rich culture. The seriousness of the condition into which we have been cast demands that we all wake up from our day-to-day
oblivion, and focus on the reality. Responsibility means that everybody is cast in the role of the ideal captain who has to steer the ship of state under threat – the boy who has grown up. Such is the inclusive virtue of democracy at its best. This is the person who accepts the weight of making decisions that affect the lives of many citizens, who is unblinkingly alert to the potential for dire consequences, is willing to take responsibility for them, and then, at the end of it all, remains able to act.”

A SHORT BIBLIOGRAPHY


Boff L (1997) *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, Orbis Books


Corcoran P B (ed.) *The Earth Charter in Action: toward a sustainable world*, KIT Publishers

Curtin F (2006) *Solidarity for a Sustainable Future*, a discussion paper for Brisbane Earth Dialogues, Green Cross International

Gorbachev M ((2006) *Manifesto for the Earth*, Clairview


Hawken P, Lovins A and Lovins LH (1999), *Natural Capitalism*, Earthscan


Porritt J (2006) *Capitalism as if the world matters*, Earthscan


Preston, N (2002), *Exploring Eco-Justice: reframing ethics and spirituality in an era of globalisation*, The Felix Arnott Lecture, St Francis’ College, Brisbane


The Earth Charter, [www.earthcharter.org](http://www.earthcharter.org)