Kenosis, Climate Change & Christianity

by Sallie McFague, Ph.D.

When people ask me what I do and I answer that I am a theologian who investigates the connections of religion with economics and ecology, they often give me a funny look. What does “religion” have to do with financial and environmental matters? Money and the earth have not figured large in many Westerners’ understanding of religion.

But times have changed. The 2010 edition of *State of the World*, a highly-regarded annual report, suggests that religions must be major players in the most important two-sided crisis of our time—the economic and ecological one. The report applauds religions for recent attention to environmental concerns—from “greening” church buildings to re-evaluating scriptures for ecological friendly doctrines—but bemoans that religions have not given comparable attention to economics. Somehow they fail to see the intrinsic connection between environmentalism and consumerism. However, we are becoming aware that these apparently different fields are tightly interlocked, for it is the rampant use of energy that creates both our consumer paradise as well as depletes the planet’s resources and contributes to global warming. To put it as simply as possible: it is not sufficient to consume in a “green” fashion; rather, we must consume LESS, a lot less. Buying a hybrid car does not permit us to drive more, although that is often the underlying rationale by many people who believe that quality can substitute for quantity. Quantity still matters; in fact, we are at such a level of consumption in relation to the carrying capacity of our planet that reduction must take a major role in sustainability. No one wants to face this fact; changing from a gas-guzzling car to a hybrid is not enough—we may have to reconsider the use of automobiles, PERIOD.

The statement from the *State of the World* advising “reducing and even eliminating” the use of cars and airplanes causes a global gasp. Surely not. The shock, however, causes us to realize how far we have to go in both our attitudes and practices. We human beings are so embedded in the culture of consumerism that asking us to curb consumerism—let alone eliminate precious forms of it—is like asking us to stop breathing. It is important to take this seriously: the “culture of consumerism” is not just a form of life we can accept or reject; it has now become like the air we breathe. Consumerism is a cultural pattern that leads people to find meaning and fulfillment through the consumption of goods and services. Thus, the well-known comment that consumerism is the newest and most successful “religion” is not an understatement.

I would suggest that religions are being asked to take on what no other field has been willing to assume, yet is at the...
I consider these words to be marching orders for religions. Such a position would not only serve the planet, but also be a return of religions to their own spiritual roots and cause them to recognize how far they have deviated.6 The insidious message that the purpose of human life is to consume is a “heresy” and should be condemned as such! Religious traditions may find such a return re-vitalizing of their basic message—restraint, not for the sake of ascetic denial of the world, but in order that “abundant life” might be possible for all.7 My small contribution is to take up this challenge with an in-depth study of one form of restraint in one religion—“kenosis” or self-emptying in Christianity.

We have reached the point in public discussion of the planet’s twin monetary and ecological crises where we have one major need—not more information but strategies, practices, for moving into action. Can religions make a contribution by sharing their profound, counter-cultural, and often unpopular message that abundant life at both personal and public levels is found not by expressing one’s ego as our market-oriented, individualist culture encourages, but by losing one’s ego in service to others? Can we see this much-neglected aspect of many world religions—counter-cultural kenosis—not as the only answer to the issues, but as one, important, and needed perspective?

Increasingly, the issue of how to live well has become one of changing from how we are living now to a different way. As our ecological and economic crises have become worse, more people are questioning the reigning culture of insatiable greed. They are coming to the conclusion that the prospects of consumer culture have been greatly overrated and serious change at a fundamental level—of who we think we are in the scheme of things and what we must do—is necessary. Change at this level is incredibly difficult. Yet, it is precisely change at this fundamental level that most religions are about—it is called “conversion” in Christian circles and demands thinking and living differently than conventional society recommends.

But how do people change behavior? Behind our decisions of how to live stand our most basic beliefs: who do we think we are in the scheme of things? What is our worldview? One thoughtful person puts it this way: “Be careful how you interpret the world. It is like that.”8 We live within our models, our worldviews, and they deeply and subtly influence the decisions we make, including ones about the environment.

For instance, if we hold views of God, the world, and ourselves that are dualistic, individualistic, and anthropocentric, we will “naturally” decide that climate change, for instance, is not a serious matter. If we see God as a distant, supernatural, all-powerful being who rules the world, then it is not our responsibility to change our behavior so poor human beings and other animals might live. Rather, we say, “Let God do it.” If, however, we see everything, including God, as interrelated and interdependent, a worldview supported by contemporary science as well as the wisdom of many religions, then we see...
we are responsible for the well-being of the whole, including less fortunate human beings and other life-forms.

We need to change our images of God, from seeing God as king and master over the world to imagining the world as within God, like a baby in the womb. We live and move and have our being within God. We need to wake up from the lie of the current worldview of individual, selfish fulfillment through consumerism to the reality of fulfillment by sharing with needy fellow creatures and the earth itself. Religious understandings of limitation, detachment, self-emptying, and compassion can help us do this. The Christian notion of self-emptying and the Buddhist understanding of compassion are two illustrations of the contribution religions should be making to the crisis of climate change. What we need is to move from one worldview of self, of who we are in the scheme of things, which encourages narrow, individualistic, greedy behavior to a view of self as “universal,” in which all are included. The Dalai Lama has said that we ought to think of the needs of strangers in the same way that a mother responds to the needs of her child, and Christians say much the same thing with “love the neighbor as yourself.” We might put it this way: the world is my body. Who I am does not stop with the limits of my own skin, or with my own family or nation or even with all human beings, but stretches to include all living creatures. Only with such a radical change in “who we think we are” will we be able to make the deep changes necessary to turn us around from ruining the planet to helping it flourish. This change needs to happen at all levels of our life from the personal—what we eat and how we get to work—to the public—how we tax carbon emissions and distribute scarce resources fairly.

...we are responsible for the well-being of the whole...

Thus, I am suggesting that the religions of the world have a major role to play in the climate change crisis. Religion should answer the call to return to its deepest roots of restraint, limitation, sharing, and self-emptying so others might live.

This process of change from belief to action contains the following steps:
1. Experiences of “voluntary poverty” can shock middle-class people away from self-fulfillment through accumulation, one is able to really pay attention to others, not as objects for one’s own goals, but as subjects in their own right. These subjects are other human beings or life-forms, and even the processes that sustain life such as rivers, trees, and climate patterns.
2. The focus of one’s attention on the needs of others, especially the most physical, basic needs, i.e., food. Freed from finding fulfillment through accumulation, one is able to really pay attention to others, not as objects for one’s own goals, but as subjects in their own right. These subjects are other human beings or life-forms, and even the processes that sustain life such as rivers, trees, and climate patterns.
3. The gradual development of a “universal self.” As the line containing one’s concern for others (compassion) moves from its narrow focus on the ego (and one’s nearest and dearest) to reach out further and further until there is no line left: even a caterpillar counts. This journey, rather than diminishing the self, increases its delight.
4. The model of the inclusive self operates at both personal and public levels. For instance, the planetary House Rules operate at both public and personal levels: 1) Take only your share; 2) Clean up after yourself; 3) Keep the house in good repair for future occupants.

In conclusion, while other fields contributing to our planetary crises often end with the despairing remark, “Of course, it is a spiritual, an ethical problem,” the religions of the world should offer their distinctive answer: “Yes, it is, and let us look at that process of change from belief to action.”

Global Greenhouse Gas Emission by Sector 2010

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When I was in school in England, the dean of my college told us when we first arrived that we could walk on the grass in the courtyard, but not across it. That helped me love the English and their language. Here is another good use of prepositions: there are limits of growth, and there are limits to growth.

The limits of growth are worth dwelling on for a moment. Contrary to the constant claims that we need more growth, there is only so much growth can do for us. If economists were true to their trade, they would recognize that there are diminishing returns to growth. Most obviously, the value of income growth declines as one gets richer. An extra $1,000 of income means a lot more to someone making $15,000 a year than to someone making $150,000. Meanwhile, growth at some point also has increasing marginal costs. For example, workers have to put in too many hours, or the climate goes haywire. It follows that for the economy as a whole, we can reach a point where the extra costs of more growth exceed the extra benefits. One should stop growing at that point. Otherwise the country enters the realm of “uneconomic growth,” to use Herman Daly’s delightful phrase, where the costs of growth exceed the benefits it produces.1

America is now experiencing uneconomic growth, if one could measure and add up all the environmental, security, social, and psychological costs that US economic growth generates at this point in our history, and throw in the costs of the lost opportunities occasioned by our growth fetish, they would exceed the benefits of further ramping up what is already the highest GDP per capita of any major economy.2 Growth is not delivering for Americans despite the high price we pay for it.

It is time for America to move to post-growth society, where working life, the natural environment, our communities and families, and the public sector are no longer sacrificed for the sake of mere GDP growth; where illusory promises of ever-more growth no longer provide an excuse for neglecting our country’s compelling social needs; and where true citizen democracy is no longer held hostage to the growth imperative.

The case that there are limits to growth—crudely, not that we shouldn’t grow but that we cannot grow—is based on the perception that we are entering a new age of environmental scarcity and rising prices that will constrain growth.3 The world economy, having doubled in size three times since 1950, is phenomenally large in comparison with the planetary base that is the setting for all economic activity. It is now consuming the planet’s available resources on a scale that rivals their supply while releasing its waste products back into the environment on a scale that greatly affects the major biogeo-physical cycles of the planet. Natural resources are becoming increasingly scarce, and the planet’s sinks for absorbing waste products are already exhausted in many contexts. According to the Ecological Footprint analysis, Earth would have to be 50 percent larger than it is for today’s economy to be environmentally sustainable.4

If we now live in a world where the natural resources, ecological services, and environmental sinks [e.g., oceans, rainforests] needed for economic activity are becoming scarcer across a wide front, we should see prices rising. And indeed we do. As economist Paul Krugman explained in late 2010: “Oil is back above $90 a barrel. Copper and cotton have hit record highs. Wheat and corn prices are way up. Overall, world commodity prices have risen by a quarter in the past six months…. What the commodity markets are telling us is...
that we’re living in a finite world, in which the rapid growth of emerging economies is placing pressure on limited supplies of raw materials, pushing up their prices.... Also, over the past year, extreme weather—especially severe heat and drought in some important agricultural regions—played an important role in driving up food prices. And, yes, there’s every reason to believe that climate change is making such weather episodes more common.6

How serious are global environmental threats? Here is one measure of the problem: all that we have to do to destroy the planet’s climate and biota [i.e., all planetary life forms] and leave a ruined world to future generations is to keep doing what is being done today. Continue to release greenhouse gases at current rates, continue to impoverish ecosystems and to

...addressing our many challenges will require the rise of a new consciousness...

release toxic chemicals at current rates, and the world in the latter part of this century won’t be fit to live in. But, of course, human activities are not holding steady at current levels—they are dramatically accelerating. It took all of history to build the $7 trillion world economy of 1950; more recently, economic activity has grown by $7 trillion every decade. At typical rates of growth, the world economy will now double in size in twenty years, perhaps fewer. We are thus facing the possibility of an enormous increase in environmental deterioration, just when the world needs to move strongly in the opposite direction.6

Achieving a successful and sustaining post-growth economy may require dramatic interventions. The Center for the Advancement of a Steady State Economy sees such an economy as:

A positive alternative to the pursuit of endless economic growth. It is an economy that aims to maintain a stable level of resource consumption and a stable population. It is an economy where energy and resource use are reduced to levels that are within ecological limits, and where the goal of maximizing economic output is replaced by the goal of maximizing quality of life.

They isolate its four key features: (1) sustainable scale, or a state in which the economy fits within the planet’s ability to provide resources and absorb wastes, (2) fair distribution and equal opportunity, (3) efficient allocation of resources (“taking account of where markets work and where they don’t”) and (4) a culture in which the demands for economic growth defer to things that really matter—the health and security of individuals and communities.7

A major and very hopeful path is seeding the landscape with innovative, instructive models. A remarkable and yet undernoticed thing going on in the United States today is the proliferation of innovative models of community revitalization and business enterprise. Local currencies, slow money, state Genuine Progress Indicators, locavores—these are bringing the future into the present in very concrete ways.8 These actual models will grow in importance as communities search for answers on how the future should look, and they can change minds. Seeing is believing.9

Many have concluded that addressing our many challenges will require the rise of a new consciousness, with different values dominant in American culture. For some, it is a spiritual awakening—a transformation of the human heart. For others it is a more intellectual process of coming to see the world anew and deeply embracing the emerging ethic of the environment and the old ethic of what it means to love thy neighbor as thyself. But for all, the possibility of a sustainable and just future will require major cultural change and a reorientation of what society values and prizes most highly.10

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James Gustave Speth has served as the Administrator of the UN Development Program, Dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and founder and president of the World Resources Institute. He currently is a professor at the Vermont School of Law and serves as Distinguished Senior Fellow at Demos. His books include the award-winning, The Bridge at the Edge of the World and Red Sky at Morning.

A MATTER OF SPIRIT 5
A changing climate leads to changes in the frequency, intensity, spatial extent, duration, and timing of extreme weather and climate events, and can result in unprecedented extreme weather and climate events. —Managing the Risks of Extreme Events and Disasters to Advance Climate Change, IPCC 2012 report

**Northeast**

Superstorm Sandy, 2012

"I looked out and the next thing you know, the water just came up through the grates. It came up so quickly you couldn’t do anything about it." —Leo Quigley, Little Ferry, NJ Resident

The superstorm affected the entire Eastern Seaboard. Hundreds of thousands of people lost homes and businesses, 285 people lost their lives. Scientists report, “Sea surface temperatures along the Atlantic coast [had] been running at over 3°C above normal… With every degree C, the waterholding of the atmosphere goes up 7%, and the moisture provides fuel for the tropical storm, increases its intensity, and magnifies the rainfall by double that amount.”

**Southwest**

Drought, 2013

“It’s not a nice feeling knowing that your town could be completely turned into a ghost town because they don’t have a water supply.” —Greg Gustafson, Resident of Lake of the Woods, CA

The shifting jet stream which brought cold and snow to the rest of the US moved precipitation away from California. The drought is the most severe ever recorded with some cities having the least rainfall in recorded history. California residents saw 2013 as the warmest and 3rd driest in 119 years. In January the municipal water system announced that “it can’t get water to farmers” in the state which supplies over half of America’s fruit and vegetables.

**Midwest**

Polar Vortex, 2013-2014

“We’ve… compare[d] it to the record… and putting this winter in context, it really has been as severe as people think.” —Barbara Boustead, National Weather Service

The National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration reported that prolonged snow and cold was due to a bizarre shift in a jet stream that dipped farther south and took longer to move than usual. IA, IL, IN, MI, MN, MO, WI had a top 10 coldest winter and Detroit had its snowiest winter on record.

**Northwest**

Landslides, 2012-2014

“It was like a movie… Houses were exploding. The next thing I see is my neighbor’s chimney coming into the front door.” —Amanda Skorjanc, Oso, WA landslide survivor, 2014

The winter of 2012-2013 is cited as “one of the worst slide seasons in nearly 100 years” with a 1400% increase—from 4 to 56—in the number of slides that blocked train service. Rainfall was 130% above normal. This rain coupled with intense deforestation made the ground much more unstable and slide-prone.

**South Texas**

Dead Zone, 2013

"Usually you see bait fish on the water. You don't see no bait fish, nothing. Nothing's there… I don't have… testing material to test the water, but I know something's wrong." —Fisherman Terry Pizani

The 2nd largest dead zone, spanning over 6,000 square miles, is in the Gulf of Mexico. There are more than 400 dead zones around the world, covering 95,000 miles². Pollution and CO₂ buildup cause massive algae growth and die-off, which leave too little oxygen in the water to sustain life. Local fishermen said 2013 was a particularly bad year, perhaps due to the greater than average rainfall in the rest of the country increasing chemical runoff into the Mississippi River.

**South Georgia**

Drought & Floods, 2013

“In October, we had flashfloods in Austin. Hundreds of people lost their homes. People lost their lives…. But very little of that rain fell in our reservoirs. So we’re still in a serious water shortage.” —Mose Buchele from StateImpact Texas

In Texas, Summer 2013 was much drier than usual, forcing farmers to sell cattle and lose a large amount of harvest. In November the missing rains came in full force, flooding over 1,300 homes. By December half of the southeast had “abnormally dry conditions,” while other areas had extreme flooding.
Human Health Vulnerabilities in a Warming World

by Timnit Ghermay, M.D.

Human health depends on the health of the underlying ecosystems that support our lives. Since the alarm was first raised in the 1980s, the mounting evidence has only gotten stronger that climate change is damaging our ecosystems and threatening life as we know it.

Our Earth is warming at an accelerating rate due to human activity. Examination of Northern Hemisphere temperature recordings which began in 1880 reveal that the hottest 12 years occurred in the last 15 years, with 2012 being the hottest year ever recorded in the US. A consequence of atmospheric and oceanic warming, as well as rising humidity, is increased frequency and intensity of heat waves. In 2003, a heat wave lasting about 2 weeks caused approximately 35,000 deaths across Europe and cost $13 billion. A study involving 13 French cities during this period revealed that 60% of the increased deaths were directly attributable to dehydration, hyperthermia and heat stroke, secondary only to the heat wave.

People vulnerable to heat waves are outdoor workers, athletes and the elderly, especially elderly women, who have a decreased physiological capacity to compensate. With a global trend of urbanization and predicted aging of the population in developed countries, a greater proportion of the world’s population will be at risk from extreme heat events. Behavioral adaptations such as public education and awareness, improved health care, air conditioning and a healthier population will reduce the morbidity and mortality.

Climate change might also alter the timing and duration of the pollen season, as well as the geographic range of those allergens which cause respiratory diseases such as hay fever and asthma. Studies show that ragweed grown in an atmosphere of higher carbon dioxide (CO₂) levels results in 60% more pollen than ragweed grown in lower CO₂ concentration. The trade winds blow dust and air-borne allergens—such as pollen, fungi and spores—from the expanding arid lands of Africa across to the Caribbean islands and Central America, causing increasing respiratory symptoms. Both asthma and respiratory symptoms disproportionately affect children.

Global climate variability in precipitation is demonstrated by increased frequency and intensity of heavy rains, flooding and storms in some regions, and less in others. In the immediate aftermath, health concerns related to injury; infectious diseases such as dengue fever, malaria and cholera; and exposure to house molds and flushed chemicals predominate, while malnutrition and mental health issues tend to occur later. For instance in 1998, Hurricane Mitch dumped six feet of rain over a three-day period on Central America. Thousands were killed and cases of dengue fever, malaria, cholera and leptospirosis skyrocketed. Periodic flooding linked to El Niño–Southern Oscillation has also been associated with malaria epidemics in the dry coastal region of northern Peru. Coastal storms can also trigger harmful algal blooms—red tides—that harbor pathogens and create oxygen deprived “dead zones” in gulfs.

Furthermore, warmer temperatures prolong the breeding season, increase reproduction rates of mosquitoes and shorten the maturation period for the parasite; all leading to increased transmission rates. A recent 20-year study looking at malaria infection rates in the highlands of Ethiopia and Colombia found conclusively that in warmer years, malaria moved up to a higher altitude and back down to lower altitude in cooler years. In Ethiopia where 37 million people are at risk for malaria, a 1.8 °F increase in temperature is estimated to result in 3 million new cases. Similarly, as glaciers have retreated, the geographic range of ticks that transmit Lyme disease and viral encephalitis has extended north in the Czech Republic and Sweden, seeming to correlate with warming trends. Continued climate change will likely expand the geograph-
ical range and incidence of these diseases, infecting new populations. These populations lack protective immunity and are therefore at risk for more severe morbidity and mortality.

Increasing climate variability may also aid the outbreak of diseases. During the 1987-1992 drought in the Southwest, the rodent-predator population of coyotes, snakes and raptors was significantly reduced, so that when early heavy rains returned in 1993, the rodent population exploded by tenfold. Increased human exposure to deer mice led to an outbreak and first diagnosis of the respiratory disease of Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome in the Western Hemisphere. Interestingly, the traditional history of the Navajo Tribe describes a similar disease, which they associated with mice and dealt with by implementing public health measures similar to those in Western medicine.

In addition, there is some suggestion that climate change may exacerbate conflicts in tropical countries. Solomon Hsiang and his colleagues examined the effects of warmer and dryer years, El Niño, and cooler years, La Niña, on 200 human conflicts in tropical and non-tropical countries. Over a 54-year period, they found that the number of conflicts in tropical countries doubled in warmer years (6%) compared to cooler years (3%).8 A recent case in point is Darfur, where diminishing well water instigated local farmers to stop sharing their water with nomads as they had done for hundreds of years. Further deterioration of their relationship led to many atrocities of war, including genocide.

A common consequence of extreme weather events such as floods, landslides, rising sea levels, drought, wildfires, conflict and salination of farm lands is population displacement. Crowding, mixing of populations with different immunity, poor hygiene and close proximity of sick and healthy people in shelters and refugee camps—especially in an undernourished population due to diminished food production—make it an ideal condition for the rapid spread of infectious diseases such as norovirus, cholera and salmonella.

Unfortunately, the effects of climate change are expected to be more severe near the Equator where the poorest countries are located. These overburdened countries, with baseline undernourished populations, have less resources and infrastructure to deal with the further compromise of water and sanitation systems, crop losses, refugees and emergency and healthcare systems.

The good news is that some adaptive measures are already underway. One successful story of where political commitment and financial investment has paid off is in the case of malaria. The World Malaria Report 2013 states that between 2000 and 2012, adaptive measures such as mosquito nets, testing and combination drugs “saved an estimated 3.3 million lives…. Malaria mortality rates were reduced by about 42% globally and by 49% in the World Health Organization African Region.” Global and African Region malaria incidence rates were also reduced by 25% and 31%, respectively.8 We need to support and strengthen adaptive public health measures such as vaccinations, clean water and sanitation. Eliminating poverty and implementing essential healthcare services and tailored disaster preparedness and response are also all essential. International systems of surveillance and control of climate change diseases also need to be strengthened.

These adaptive measures however, only buy us time and ameliorate the havoc that these increasingly extreme weather events create. Encouragingly, significant financial savings in health benefits are projected from strategies directed at primary climate change mitigation policies. Recent studies suggest that aggressive reduction in greenhouse gas emissions could prevent 10 million premature deaths by 2030. Keywan Riahi, a lead author of the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, states, “If you take health impact into account economically, it makes mitigating climate change much more affordable.”10

Ultimately, preventing catastrophic climate change requires transformation: transformation of the heart and mind; and transformation in the social, economic and political actions of individuals, communities and governments in order to significantly reduce global greenhouse gas emissions and transition economies from ones based on fossil fuel to ones of renewable energy.
Nurul Hashem: Climate Refugee

“The sea used to be much further away. We had to move our houses 300 yards in 2008, but the water now comes to the house.” Nurul Hashem calls himself a climate refugee. His family’s home on Kutubdia, an island off the coast of Bangladesh, has been engulfed by the Bay of Bengal. The Island is half the size it was 20 years ago; six villages now belong to the sea. “We lost everything. We are not happy, because we must move again. Climate change is making thousands of people homeless.”

Studies of a town near Kutubdia show the sea rising by as much as 8mm each year, but the villagers “reckon it’s twice that at least” on the Island. Even at 8mm a year, the sea level would rise enough in the next 25 years to destroy freshwater access and submerge the land of over 10 million people in southern Bangladesh. Hashem says their future is bleak: “We have nowhere left to go. If we had any money we would go to Cox’s Bazar or Chittagong. All we can do is fish. We cannot protect ourselves. So we stay. Our life is with the sea.”

Shifting Seasons: Farming in Uganda

Bekah sighed as she gazed out the window at the heavy, pounding rain. “This year is not good...” She trails off, and then shaking her head repeats, “Not good.” As she has done every year, she borrowed money from neighbors to buy seeds for the upcoming growing season. She worries how she will pay them back. In rural Uganda, subsistence farming sustains practically every family—it is simply the way of life. Time-tested traditions of knowing when to plant and when to harvest have failed this community for the past two years.

“This season, the rains came earlier; all my seeds have washed away before they could root,” reports Bekah. Last season, the rain did not come until after all of her young plants had shriveled up and died from the heat and lack of water.

Bekah does not know why the weather has changed so dramatically, but her main concern is how she will to feed her family. “This month, maybe we are going to be hungry,” Bekah says of her family of three daughters and a son, and of her community.

Resources

Websites and Reports
Climate Action 2013-2014, climateactionprogramme.org
Climate Solutions, climatesolutions.org
Earth as Our Home, Sinsinawa Dominicans, ipjc.org
Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, ipcc.ch
Taken By Storm: Responding to the Impacts of Climate Change, www.christianaid.org.uk
Three Degrees Warmer, threedegreeswarmer.org


Books
Berry, Thomas, The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth
McKibben, Bill, Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future
Miller, RW, ed., God, Creation, and Climate Change: A Catholic Response to the Environmental Crisis
What are we to think? The slow-burning climate emergency is the biggest challenge we face as a planet, yet nobody wants to talk about it around the dinner table—not the way our parents and grandparents talked about World War II, seventy-five years ago.

What are we to make of this great silence? Is it the fear that Uncle Mike will turn out to be a climate-denier and get all huffy and puffy and blow your ideas down?

Or is it that after discussing it and acknowledging how dangerous the looming emergency is, you won’t know how to end the conversation? Urgent danger brings the need for urgent action, but when we look around nobody seems to be acting. Life goes on as normal. Mow the lawn, get the kids to school, what’s on TV? It’s as if we are living in Pleasantville, where reality is black and white until a freethinking teenager comes along; or The Truman Show, where reality is a deliberate deception designed to create the perfect TV show.

So why the great disconnect, the strange paralysis? Even if you live in a household of activists for whom challenging the status quo is the status quo, you’ve got to admit, it’s a strangely silent world out there.

We wear three shades over our eyes that prevent us from seeing clearly and acting—so let us remove them.

Removing the first shade involves recognizing, as a team of researchers recently showed, that the U.S. is an oligarchy, not a democracy. The media is biased, in accordance with its corporate ownership. Many politicians in Washington are saying what their corporate and plutocratic sponsors want, which does not include climate change. And the White House is limited in what it can do without support from Congress. So take it off, and realize that there is another reality, a very urgent one, behind the organized triviality of the daily media.

Removing the second shade involves changing our sense of time. We live biologically in the present, but the climate crisis has a slow-burning fuse. Greenhouse gases have been accumulating in the atmosphere since 1750, due to all the fossil fuels we’ve been burning. Biologically, we respond well to an immediate crisis, but not to a slowly simmering crisis. If we take off the shades of immediacy however, one of the climate solutions—and there are many—opens an astonishing vista.

For the first long period of human history we obtained our energy from firewood—and slaves. In the second period, we discovered fossil fuels. Bingo! Here was all this free energy that had been stored away for millions of years.

But the fossil fuels will run out even without the climate crisis that will oblige us to leave 80% of the coal, oil and gas underground. In another fifty years, we wear three shades over our eyes that prevent us from seeing clearly and acting...
years, perhaps a hundred, they would all be gone anyway. So then what? If we return to firewood, we will quickly destroy what’s left of the world’s forests. If we turn to nuclear, the uranium will soon run out and we’ll be left with a horrible mess of radioactive waste. But if we turn to solar, along with other renewables, an astonishing realization dawns. The Sun sends us a thousand times more energy than we need every day and will continue to do so for a long time.

How long? The Sun will not begin to turn into a red giant, becoming so warm that we need to evacuate, for almost two billion years—and with every year that passes solar technology will improve in efficiency and fall in price.

For our entire existence, we have lived with energy scarcity. To overcome it we have cut down forests, killed whales, enslaved whole peoples and killed millions in bloody wars. With the coming of the solar age, all that ends. How soon? Right now.

A 4-kilowatt (kW) solar system might generate 5,000 kilowatt hours (kWh) a year, depending on where you live. The panels will be good for 30 years, and at 2014 installed prices they will cost $4 a watt, or $16,000. If you pay 20 cents per kWh, your solar system will save you $1,000 a year. Over 30 years it will save you $30,000 to $60,000 as the price of electricity rises. By 2020, 4 kW of solar might cost $6,500, and it will save you up to 10 times as much money over its lifetime. With numbers like this, the solar revolution is about to become a solar tsunami. Saudi Arabia, which receives an awful lot of sun, could produce its equivalent annual oil production in solar energy on just 1,000th of its desert land, earning $10 billion a year.

Take off all three shades, and you will be free to leave Pleasantville and rejoin planet Earth.

PS: How long is a billion years? The past 10,000 years contains the entire history of civilization. A billion years is 100,000 units of time like that. Now that’s a long time. Once we get past our teething problems, by restoring fair democracy and learning to live cooperatively as a planet, we will have all that time to continue our journey of discovery and self-discovery.

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Path to Paris

1992—United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)
- Governments commit to reduce atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases;
- developed countries called on to take the lead
- 195 parties (countries), including the US
- Leads to annual meetings of the Committee of Parties (COP) to decide what further actions are needed

2009—Copenhagen Accords

2010—Cancun Agreements

2011—Durban Platform for Enhanced Action

2012—Doha Climate Gateway

2013—Warsaw

2014—Lima

2015—Paris

What's next?
- Goal: to create an international, legally binding roadmap to save the planet
- The Call:
  - All countries must develop and meet aggressive emissions-reductions goals with plans to eliminate fossil fuel use and deforestation
  - To implement loss-reductions programs for countries who disproportionately suffer the consequences of a changing climate

1997—Kyoto Protocol
Comes into effect in 2005 with the ratification by 192 parties (i.e., countries & the EU). The United States, Andorra, South Sudan, Palestine & the Holy See have not ratified it. Canada withdraws in 2011.

1. Commits the 37 developed parties who ratified the treaty to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 5.2% from their 1990 emissions levels by 2012
   - Succeeded—emitted at or below goals: Belarus, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, EU, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, Slovakia, Sweden, UK & Ukraine
   - Failed—emitted beyond goals: Australia, Austria, Denmark, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Lichtenstein, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Slovenia, Spain & Switzerland

2. Establishes market-based mechanisms for countries who could not meet their goals to assist financially in the creation of sustainable development in other countries

Yearly meetings lead to additional agreements & collaboration, although little substantive change has been achieved as some of the biggest emitters refuse to give full support.

Our Local Path

Multi-State/Regional
9 agreements encompass 36 states, 3 territories & 4 Canadian provinces. The West Coast Green Highway is an initiative to make Interstate 5, connecting Canada to Mexico through Washington, Oregon and California, cleaner, greener & more sustainable by providing alternative clean fuel options.

State
28 states have climate action plans; 9 have state-wide emissions reductions goals. Michigan adopted its Climate Action Plan in 2009; and policy recommendations are currently being implemented to reach its goal of reducing emissions 20% below 2005 levels by 2020 and 80% below by 2050.

County
Over 100 counties are committed to purchasing sustainable products that have a reduced impact on the environment. Maricopa County, AZ developed a messaging system which automatically sends text alerts to agencies, businesses and residents to take action to reduce their emissions when particulate matter in the air is high.

City/Town
1,060 mayors in all 50 states, DC and Puerto Rico make commitments to Kyoto Protocol standards. This represents a population of over 88,962,980 citizens. Denver is implementing FasTracks, a mass transit system with Transit Oriented Development. CO2 emissions were reduced by 60,249 metric tons in 1 year due to the light rail riders who had never previously used alternative transit.
Reports of the gravity of climate change, the increasing cost of fossil fuels—both financially and environmentally—and a desire to prepare the country for a sustainable future has moved Denmark to take on what no other country has yet undertaken. The country has committed to be completely fossil fuel free by 2050.

The government has developed “Energy Strategy 2050,” a comprehensive pathway to realizing energy independence from oil, gas and coal. Denmark is already well on its way to reaching its 2020 goal of renewable energy supplying a third of the power grid. The transition to primarily wind and biomass energy will have a relatively low cost; the timeline allows Denmark to update its grid and power centers as old infrastructure naturally wears out. The two forms of energy complement each other well, since biomass easily compensates when wind supply is not sufficient. Interestingly, nuclear power is not included in the plan.

Businesses and individuals are given incentives for shifting their power supply. For example, a small fossil-fuel-use tax will increase every year, but reach no more than an extra ten euro per month for a household. The government is also providing information about the benefits and savings of undertaking the initial costs of transitioning to renewable sources. Furthermore, the increasing efficiency of renewable energy will continue to decrease its price. The people who have studied potential repercussions of the transition assure the country that businesses and the economy will not be negatively impacted.

The government hopes that Denmark can be an example to the rest of the world of how achievable it is to be fossil fuel free.1

Transforming Waste Management: Bogotá

Violence in rural Colombia pushed Nohra Padilla, her eleven siblings and parents to flee to Bogotá when she was seven. Trying to make ends meet, her family resorted to searching through the local landfill for scrap metal and other recyclables to sell. When she was 16, the city closed the dump, forcing Nohra and her family to start picking through trash piles on the streets where discrimination and violence was much worse.

Gradually, as Nohra began to understand more of the “big picture” of the situation and the informal recyclers in the area started to recognize her as a leader, she began to take action for change. Recyclers were not very well respected throughout the city and country, so she formalized the naturally-formed cooperatives into organizations. The Association of Recyclers of Bogotá with 3,000 members and the National Association of Recyclers in Colombia with 12,000 were born!

Respect and recognition for the profession have grown immensely. Due to Nohra’s petitioning the government and using the court system, the government has ruled that waste management contracts must include jobs for informal recyclers. Within the city, they now must be paid for their services—rather than making a living through selling what they find—and new trash pick-up routes have been established so they can sort through the material before it is taken to the landfill. Recycling has also been mandated in the city of Bogotá.

Nohra, with her community, is shifting the entire waste management structure of Colombia. They have led the rest of the country to respect recyclers and to recognize their work as necessary. Bogotá has become one of the leading Latin American cities in sustainable waste management.1
Uniting Latino Leaders for Social Change!

IPJC sponsored a statewide Latino conference to:

- Develop young and emerging leaders
- Promote grassroots community inclusion
- Act for community mobilizations, advocacy and social change

Representatives of 58 organizations, community groups and churches came from across Washington.

Justice Cafés

The March Justice Café topic of human trafficking resulted in very engaging discussions and significant new awarenesses.

The Davidson, NC Café reported, “We talked about human dignity and how our choices can affirm or deny dignity. One thing that really stuck out to us was the idea that all of our purchases are MORAL as well as economic decisions.”

In April, Cafés acted for justice on human trafficking by standing vigil to raise awareness; and creating informational posters and posting them around campuses. The Café in Roma, Lesotho gave presentations in two high schools! The Justice Café at Holy Names University engaged other students by asking them to complete stop signs which read, “I stand against human trafficking because…”

Women's Justice Circles

Handeni (Tanga Region), Tanzania

There are 25 Justice Circles going on in Tanzania! Digna Peter was trained to facilitate Justice Circles when she was in Seattle as a Community Solutions Program (CSP) fellow. CSP is a global professional development program from the State Department. The Circles are being conducted in Swahili in rural villages among mostly Muslim women. Each village’s Circle is identifying its own issue, such as water sanitation, healthcare access, and literacy.

Connell, Washington

Alejandro Aguilera-Titus provides a 2-day workshop on family, community & cultural issues.

Donations

In Honor of: 2013 Dominican West Jubilarians, Judy Byron, OP 50th Jubilee, Cele Gorman, OP, Rosemary Rognstad, Grace Sbrissa, CSJ, Joellen Sbrissa, CSJ, Holy Names Academy Graduates: Anna Crean, Therese Edwards, Anna Lewis, Clare O’Connor, Cha Cha Sawyer, Kelly Taft and Lena Tran

In Memory of: Marisa Altschul, Joyce Carver, Betty Crow, Mary Flaming, CSJP, Richard Gorman, Colleen Kelleher, Teddie Kopp

Winter 2014 AMOS — Science & Faith

Due to requests, this issue has been reprinted. Contact IPJC for copies!
Northwest Coalition for Responsible Investment
Members Address Climate Change

Bank of America contributes to climate change as a top financier of companies in greenhouse gas emissions-intensive industries, i.e., coal, oil and gas, and fossil fuel-based electric power.

NWCRI led a coalition of shareholders who filed a resolution requesting the Company to assess and report on the greenhouse gas emissions resulting from its financing portfolio. The resolution was supported by 24% of Bank of America shareholders at the annual meeting on May 7!

ExxonMobil

After 5 years of shareholder proposals, ExxonMobil, the nation’s biggest energy company has agreed to report by September 2014 on how it manages risks from fracking, including impacts to water/air quality and water/chemical usage. This step toward total disclosure is applauded by NWCRI members who co-filed the resolution which has been withdrawn.

Citing the urgent need for action on climate change, on May 6 Colgate-Palmolive demonstrated what it means to be a sustainability leader by publicly committing to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) by 25% by 2020 and 50% by 2050. This enables the Company to play its part in limiting global warming to 2°C, as recommended by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

—Colgate Sustainability Report 2013

Just Video Contest Winners

IPJC received 15 entries from 5 schools, and the winners are:

- 1st Place: Would You Have Let Us In? by JaeYeon Park and HaeIn Bae from St. Mary’s Academy, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
- 2nd Place (tie): Progress by Frances de Rubertis and Beija Flor from Holy Names Academy, Seattle, WA
- 2nd Place (tie): Lupe’s Story by Agnes Song, Jessica Duong, Amy Melendrez and Martha Vasquez from Ramona Convent Secondary School, Alhambra, CA
- 3rd Place: A Day Without School by Chaeyoon Jeong and Su Hyun Lim from St. Mary’s Academy, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

Watch all the winning videos at www.ipjc.org

Intercommunity Peace & Justice Center "Miracle on 65th Street"

Thank You!

We are grateful to everyone who participated in our Spring fundraiser to support and sustain our mission! You make this ministry possible!

Staff: Timnit Ghermay, Linda Haydock, SNJM, Giselle Cárcamo, Annapatrice Clarke, Judy Byron, OP and Justin Almeida
This Issue: Climate Change

If you don’t know where you are, you don’t know who you are.

—Wendell Berry

Gather with others to reflect on a sense of Earth consciousness. Sit in a circle and place something of the beauty of nature on a ritual table.

“Ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds of the air, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish of the sea inform you. Which of all these does not know that the hand of God has done this?” —Job 12:7-9

Leader: As we gather, I invite you to take a moment to reflect on where you live. Describe your home using only nature. (e.g., trees, flowers, lakes, mountains)

After quiet reflection, I will invite you to describe your home on Earth.

[After all have shared]

Leader: Now in communal quiet, take time to think about Earth, our home—how well do we know it?

[Give ample time for this reflection]

◇ In which bioregion do I live?
◇ Which watershed supplies my water?
◇ Where does my water go after it goes down the drain?
◇ How fertile is the soil in my neighborhood?
◇ What was on the land where I live before it was developed?
◇ What formed the land features around me? (e.g., tectonic plate lines forming mountains through earthquakes)
◇ Where is one place I can go within walking distance to appreciate nature?

Leader: What insights came to you as you considered the questions? How does your awareness of your connection with Earth affect your commitment to engage climate change?

Adapted from Discussion Course on Discovering a Sense of Place by the Northwest Earth Institute

...Global climate change is...about the future of God’s creation and the one human family.

—Global Climate Change, USCCB, 2001