

# Australian Religious Response to Climate Change

## Theological Position Paper

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There are ominous signs that the world order that we have known and relied upon for the past century and more is changing,<sup>1</sup> not because humanity is intending those changes; they are happening as a result of unintended consequences of human behaviour. Empirical evidence shows ecological systems worldwide to be under very considerable strain, and in worst cases, collapse. Science confirms that the increasing release of greenhouse gases is leading the world on a dangerous path of global warming and consequent climate change.<sup>2</sup> The changes are also building a growing inequity: inequity between human beings, and inequity between humans and the non-human creation. History tells us that unattended inequity is likely to produce a violent correction. The last 12 months have witnessed extreme weather events from fires in Russia, floods in Pakistan, Brazil and Australia, ongoing droughts in Africa and extreme cold in parts of North America and Europe. While none of these events can be specifically related to global warming and consequent climate change, science has consistently predicted that global warming increases the likelihood, intensity and frequency of such events. The year 2010 recorded the second hottest mean global temperature while eight of the hottest years recorded have occurred since the year 2000.<sup>3</sup> Local government authorities, under circumstances, now face the prospect of uninsurable property and following disaster all governing authorities face the prospect of bankrupting litigation.

It is therefore clear that underlying principles of human engagement and cooperation must change, but how are they to change, and how can we be confident that the changes will be beneficial in the long term? Have principles that undergird the web of life on earth been ignored or misunderstood?

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

<sup>2</sup> The Dutch Government issued a press release on the 5 July 2010 confirming the core conclusions of the International Panel on Climate change (IPCC), conclusions that had come under very considerable criticism and which had emanated from the fourth assessment report of a potential 3000 scientists worldwide. On 23 June 2010 IPCC announced 831 scientists (from a 3000 pool of interrelated disciplines) will co-author the fifth assessment report.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.data.giss.nasa.gov/gistemp/graphs/> (accessed 4 February 2011)

All faith communities are rooted in sacred writings that can be loosely described as ‘wisdom literature’. Common to this literature is teaching that life is relational, that human beings, while commissioned with a responsibility of care for creation, are also part of it. Humanity’s health is directly related to the health of the whole created order. How are we to understand let alone nurture health within the non-human creation? Our understanding of human health as a window into the health of the whole creation gives us a clue. It is secured through balance. The natural order presents two competing and yet necessary principles. On the one hand there is the principle of difference, diversity, separation, through which creation has developed a limitless variety of species and forms of life, including the differences within humanity itself. Communities of faith are committed to the preservation of diversity.<sup>4</sup> The creation covenant which is common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam states that God’s blessing resides on all that comes out of the ark. (Gen. 9.8-10). The loss of any species is a loss to all species. For humanity to knowingly engage in activity which diminishes diversity is to engage in activity which diminishes humanity itself. On the other hand, there is the principle, of wholeness, unity, harmony, mutuality, relationality. The whole created order is one system; there is commonality between all living things, a truth that is now proclaimed by both science and religion.<sup>5,6</sup> This truth is very beautifully expressed in the creation narrative, again common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam where individual elements of creation are described by God as *good* (Gen 1.12,18,21,25 while the whole of creation is described by God as *very good*. (Gen 1.31)

Hostility exists between the human need for resources and the creation’s need for the balance of these two principles to be maintained.<sup>7</sup> The potential of this hostility is expressed in the Hebrew word *kabas* translated ‘subdue’. (Gen 1.28). It is a hostile word, expressive of

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<sup>4</sup> *In so far as the multitude and distinction of creatures are intended by God, their diversity may be considered to contribute to the perfection of the Universe as a whole*: Thomas Aquinas, quoted in Velde, *Aquinas on God: the Divine Science of Summa Theologiae*, 127.

<sup>5</sup> Lovelock, James 2009 *The vanishing face of Gaia: a final warning*. (London: Allen Lane). Lovelock, an influential and original thinking English scientist, claims that his friend William Golding was the inspiration behind the name, Gaia, but clearly Lovelock is the mind behind the thinking that creation should be considered a single living organism

<sup>6</sup> *It is only as existing within the ordered whole of the universe that creation may present, each in its particular way, God’s goodness*: Thomas Aquinas quoted in Rudi A te Velde, *Aquinas on God: The ‘Divine Science’ of the Summa Theologiae* (Burlington: Ashgate Press 2006), 127.

<sup>7</sup> *As man proceeds toward his announced goal of the conquest of nature, he has written a depressing record of destruction, not only against the earth he inhabits but against the life that share it with him*. Carson Rachel, 2002 *Silent spring*, (Boston. Houghton Mifflin)85.

unequal power. This religious literature notes that from the foundation of creation, humanity's dual position as part of creation, and yet with a responsibility of care for it, always presents the possibility of conflict. Charles Birch says that this hostility is not new; it has existed from the moment human beings evolved from hunter gatherers to an agrarian civilisation.<sup>8</sup> Three factors, however, are relatively new, and their combined impact has turned the present moment into one of crisis and decision making:

- Since the commencement of the industrial revolution the capacity of humanity to exploit creation for its own advantage through technology has grown exponentially. While many look to technology as the saviour of all the problems faced by humanity, it is also true that technology is one of the main contributors to the problems humanity faces. Technology enables humanity to impact the created order in ways that accentuate inequity between humans and the very sources of life upon which we all depend. Such inequity has severe consequences. In addition, while technology has the potential to advance all humanity, the increasing tendency towards ownership and privatisation of even that which really belongs to the 'common wealth'<sup>9</sup> has in fact accentuated inequity between human beings.
- The global human population at the time of Christ was estimated to be 200 million, at the commencement of the industrial revolution it was estimated to be 600 million, it is currently estimated to be 6.9 billion.<sup>10</sup> The expansion of the human population is the 'elephant in the room'. It is a topic which is awkward to address politically, it is equally difficult to address in the faith communities. Clearly environmental poverty and human poverty are linked. When local ecologies become degraded human poverty becomes more desperate. Human poverty, embedded in poverty of choice, adversely affects environmental and ecological health. It is absolutely essential that the developed countries of the world maintain and increase their commitment to the millennium development goals. The health of the poorest of the world is linked to the health of the environment, while the prosperity of the wealthiest disproportionately impacts the poorest because of the scale of their carbon footprint.<sup>11</sup> We know that

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<sup>8</sup> Birch, Charles. 1990 *On Purpose* (Sydney: New South Wales University Press).

<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Sachs *Common Wealth Economics for a crowded planet* 2009 (London Penguin Books)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.worldometers.info/population/> (Accessed 4 February 2011)

<sup>11</sup> Australians are estimated to have the largest per capita carbon footprint at approximately 24 tons per annum while many of the poorest in the world have a footprint of less than 1 ton. The Chinese footprint is approximately 5 tons per person

reduction in poverty and educational development slows population growth. While Faith communities applaud the Federal Government's commitment to increase its overseas aid commitment to 0.5% of GDP, we implore Australia, now arguably the most stable economic community in the OECD to increase its commitment to at least the international standard of 0.7%.

- As standards of living increase, every human being becomes dependent upon an increased proportion of available resources. Resources are finite in two respects. First they are finite in gross terms; there is only a certain amount of oil to be extracted and only a certain amount of fresh water available for human consumption, food production and the retention of healthy river systems. Secondly, ecological systems are also finite in terms of what can be sustained or generated within a certain time frame. Only a certain amount of grain can be grown every year. If extreme weather events reduce, or destroy, expected yields, there is a time lag between the immediate pressures of hunger and the next cycle of production. Many global food stocks are now at their lowest level for decades, increasing prices and contributing to civil unrest. It is estimated that exploitation of the non-human creation to feed the human appetite is now running at an annual, compounding, 140%,<sup>12</sup> escalating our debt to the future. In the face of this situation we note that world governments face a dilemma; long term goals are always in danger of being sacrificed under the weight of immediate pressure. However, what is not faced today is inevitably more expensive tomorrow. Annual budgets have to be reined in. Public fiscal debt in many parts of the world is running at potentially catastrophic levels: 100%, or more, of GDP is not uncommon. One way to ease this problem is to postpone, perhaps cancel, any commitment to meeting the real costs to the environment of resource production, especially energy resource. This has been the tragic outcome of international negotiation over the last decade and more. The outcome is that environmental debt to the future is rapidly increasing. Many respected voices, of whom Lord Reece<sup>13</sup> is one say: it cannot be taken for granted that humanity will journey towards the end of this century without reaching a point where adaptive choice has been so reduced that life as we know it for billions has become impossible.

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<sup>12</sup> *World footprint: do we fit on the planet?*, [http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/world\\_footprint/](http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/world_footprint/) (accessed 4 October 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Lord Reece is Britain's Chief Scientist. His remarks were made during his 2010 lecture visit to Melbourne.

In the light of this summary situation, we the members of Australia's faith communities have two responses.

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

We human beings have no future on this planet if we behave as if life is to be lived in an amoral vacuum. The Nobel Peace Laureate, Archbishop Desmond Tutu,<sup>14</sup> says that we human beings must assume the undergirding morality of life. He argues that in difficult if not desperate situations the only appropriate response is not what gives me the best advantage, or what action might increase my share, but what is right? A lesser response might appear to provide short term gain, but it ultimately undermines the outcome that is sought, because beneficial outcomes are always outcomes that are morally right.

1. It is a moral issue because while the potentially detrimental outcomes of climate change most severely impact the poor, it is the prosperous who most significantly contribute to the cause through a more significant carbon footprint. The selfish prosperous may want to argue that that no responsibility needs to be taken for accidents of birth and geography, or for unequal access to opportunity, and no responsibility needs to be taken. We argue that such a position is not only immoral, but foolish. It is our argument that because this is essentially a moral universe, gross inequity will not continue indefinitely without significant, even violent correction. There has been ample evidence of such correction in regional politics on many continents over recent decades. It is the responsibility of the world's prosperous to do two things:
  - Meet the legitimate environmental life style costs imposed through carbon emissions. (The prosperous with a per capita footprint of 25 tons must meet the cost; the most obvious way of achieving this is through a mechanism that prices carbon).
  - Through commitment to the millennium development goals and other similar initiatives, peoples of the developed world must work to reduce the disparity between rich and poor, which on a global scale continues to grow.

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2. It is a moral issue because outcomes that arise from choices in the present reduce choices for future generations. We, members of faith communities have always understood the intergenerational commitment and responsibility of human beings. We are all inheritors of the contribution that others have made before us and we all increase or decrease the options available to those who follow us. It is quite unsatisfactory to expect further technological invention to solve the problems of future generations. We must assume that over exploited resources and a climate that has been irrevocably changed because of the known life cycle of carbon places an unreasonable burden upon those who could have inherited a world without such a burden. We urge society to have a grandchild mentality, that is to say a way of thinking that weighs choices in the present against their potential cost to future generations. We also urge politicians to provide leadership and not to be swayed by members of society who appear not to hold such view, but wish every choice to be made on the basis of the short term advantage it gives them.
  
3. It is a moral issue in that morality is not restricted to activity between human beings alone. Albert Schweitzer noted:

*A man is ethical only when life, as such is sacred to him, that of plants and animals as that of his fellow men, and when he devotes himself helpfully to all of life that needs help ... The ethic of relation man to man is not something apart by itself: it is only a particular relation that results from the universal one.*<sup>15</sup>

How human beings relate to the rest of the created order bears testimony to the inner integrity of humanity itself. If humanity can easily watch the disappearance of other species without feeling the cost, if diversity is diminished without grief, then humanity as a moral species has already been severely diminished.<sup>16</sup> We in the faith communities do not argue for the care of the natural order at the expense of humanity's needs, but rather for an appropriate balance. We accept that non human species and ecological systems have value in themselves, but we are not sympathetic to an ideology which puts the needs of creation over against the needs of humanity. We argue that a way forward must be found in which humanity flourishes because the non-human creation retains its healthy equilibrium and that the non-human creation flourishes because reasonable human need has been met.

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

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<sup>15</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *Out of my life and thought: an autobiography* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1933) 185.

<sup>16</sup> 'Every form of life is unique, warranting respect regardless of its worth to man, and to accord other organisms such recognition, man must be guided by a moral code of practice': *World Charter for Nature* (United Nations, 1982), <http://www.unep.org/law/PDF/UNEPEnv-LawGuide&PrincN05.pdf> (accessed 3 September 2010).

In his sermon in the Copenhagen Cathedral prior to the 2010 global conference, Rowan Williams<sup>17</sup> said we do not have an environmental crisis so much as a crisis of the human vocation.<sup>18</sup> Has humanity reached its fullest potential when in relation to the non-human creation and in relation to other human beings we stand above in a position of power, control and exploitation or when we stand beside as a partner in service of the common good? While the former proposition is decried as morally wrong, undemocratic, manipulative and abusive in the human domain, it has become the accepted model of behaviour in relation to creation; driven by an overriding economic model which assumes exponential growth as the only possible proposition worthy of underwriting human trade.

Our faith communities are marked by well rehearsed differences of belief, but we hold much, sadly less well rehearsed, in common. We hold in common an understanding that human beings are vocationally called to be carers of creation in partnership with the Creator. We have a responsibility to maintain the balance referred to at the beginning of this address between the flourishing of rich diversity and the strengthening of the bonds of mutuality that exist between all forms of life. Unreasonable advantage cannot be reaped at one point of creation without thought and redress to the disadvantages that are imposed at another.

We also contend that in the complexities of life we human beings need to develop morally sound priorities or hierarchies in our human affairs. For example most human beings accept the priority of care for family over against professional development, status, or increased salary. We want to question the priority or hierarchy that has been given to economic growth above all other priorities in national and international affairs. We do not accept that GDP is the best, let alone the only, way of measuring the strength, health, and potential of national and international life. We argue that Australians, with housing per capita that exceeds the average floor space of any other nation on earth, and with average incomes that more than meet essential needs, do not need, and probably should not expect, further increases in material wellbeing. We note that while tragically there are many who are genuinely poor, equally there are many who claim to be finding it hard to make ends meet who are in fact finding it hard to pay mortgages on very large houses and to pay off a glut of consumer goods. We note that social analysis indicates a greater level of loneliness, mental ill-health and life style sicknesses than we would ideally find acceptable in a healthy society. Attention to these matters rather than to further material well being should, we argue, be a higher priority than further material well being and should become a matter of central debate in public forum.

Finally we all hold in common a commitment to our relationships with God, one another and the created order as of the highest priority. We note with sadness primacy that is given to the individual at the expense of communities, both human and non-human. We accept as legitimate, criticism of western societies that seem to place selfish materialism above a desire for common good and mutual well-being. We accept as fundamental the defence of individual rights and their abrogation as immoral, but we argue that this is only part of the story; communities also have rights, the world's poor and marginalised have rights, those yet to be born have rights and the whole created order has the right of its own integrity.

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<sup>17</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury

<sup>18</sup> *Ask what would be a healthy and sustainable relationship with the world, a relationship that would in some way manifest both joy in and respect for the Earth*: Rowan Williams, *Sermon: Copenhagen Cathedral* (13 December 2009), <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/2728> (accessed 3 September 2010)

We consider the matters touched on this paper to be core issues to all people of faith no matter which tradition from which they come. We note that people of faith worldwide comprise two thirds of the world's population therefore action and advocacy by faith communities can and should radically change human behaviour at the beginning of this century. Whilst we recognise that a myriad of different strategies from tree planting to recycling, from a decreased emphasis upon individual prosperity to an increased emphasis upon community well being need to be instituted regionally on the basis of need; we recognise that one policy above all others is required from the political community, namely the pricing of carbon. We recognise that this must be done at a sufficient level to ensure that transition takes place in the shortest possible time frame from dependency on fossil fuels to an embracing of renewable energy. We are aware of the cost this imposes to large sections of Australian society however not to act makes no more sense than the protection in the past of out dated technologies, or tariffs to protect industry or agriculture that cannot support itself.<sup>19</sup>

Dealing with waste is a legitimate cost of production, not to meet its cost is to live a lie.

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

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<sup>19</sup> It is estimated that the cost of driving Australia to a zero carbon economy by 2020 would be \$37 billion a year for 10 years or approximately 3 per cent of GDP. Such a plan is not on any political agenda but it illustrates that a reduction of 20 per cent by 2020 is far from economically irresponsible. Manning, Paddy. 2010. 'Zero carbon plan better than two zero credibility choices', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 July, <http://www.smh.com.au/business/zero-carbon-plan-better-than-two-zero-credibility-choices-20100723-10os6.html> (accessed 12 October 2010).