CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

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EARLY IN 2011 I WAS INVITED to give a talk on climate change to the environmental group at our local parish. It followed on from a previous meeting when the speaker had argued that the issue was essentially one of social justice and that the problem is not just one of greenhouse gas emissions but concerns a whole range of the earth's resources. We in the West, with our materialist and consumerist lifestyles, do not merely contribute to climate change but devour a totally disproportionate share of the earth's natural wealth, short-changing the rest of mankind and generations to come. This is a moral issue, one of social justice:

> Human damage to the environment is one of the main moral issues of our age. As such, Christians must be concerned about it. Environmental problems are in one sense just a symptom (albeit a very important one) of injustice in the world—the injustice of a small part of the population consuming the great bulk of the resources, leaving the majority to share out the relatively little that remains, and sometimes literally to starve to death as a result. It is business as usual in the human race—the powerful using their power for their own benefit, with limited concern for the well-being of those who do not share in that power.[1]

It is important to grasp the magnitude of this problem. To achieve 'contraction and convergence'—that is, to consume only our fair share—we need to cut our consumption of non-renewable resources by more than 80 per cent. On the specific question of greenhouse gases the UK

[1] Simon Norcross, 'The Environment, the Bible and Christian Morality', at http://www.anglican.lu/forms/335.pdf.

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needs to reduce its emissions from about 11 tonnes of carbon dioxide per capita per year to about 1 tonne per capita per year; that is a reduction of around 90 per cent.[2] At first sight this is an enormously depressing conclusion. The task before us is utterly daunting. How can we possibly respond to a problem of this magnitude?

However, while in no way disagreeing with the earlier speaker, the purpose of my talk was somewhat different. First, I wanted to counter some of the prevailing misconceptions. We need to be much more clear-sighted that the actions and initiatives taken so far to respond to the problem are utterly inadequate. It is too easy to get the impression that if we change our light bulbs, put our electrical apparatus on standby, or even welcome a few wind turbines we are making a significant difference. All this is what David Mackay calls 'a flood of crazy innumerate codswallop'. His more realistic attitude is: 'If everyone does only a little, we'll achieve only a little'.[3]

In short, the technical fixes currently being promoted are insufficient to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions over a reasonable time frame, and would have negligible impact on the excessive consumption of other natural resources. Certainly technological and economic adjustments are necessary and have a role to play. But they are not the solution. Rather we are faced with the need to make a deliberate choice to change our lifestyles and live in a different manner.

Most of us, I believe, feel stuck in a pattern of living that inevitably guzzles such resources. It will not be easy to abandon this pattern—at

[2] See David MacKay, *Sustainable Energy: Without the Hot Air* (Cambridge: UIT 2008), 15. To my mind this stands out as by far the best book on this topic—if only because it cuts through journalistic waffle and is numerate. MacKay dedicates his book 'to those who will not have the benefit of two billion years of accumulated energy resources'. It can be downloaded for free from http://www.withouthotair.com/download.html.

[3] MacKay, *Sustainable Energy*, 3.

least not acting on our own as isolated individuals. I cannot really see myself doing so—except perhaps in small ways and at the margins. Moreover, even if we in the 'enlightened' West did change our lifestyles, what difference would it make elsewhere? This is no longer a world in which the West imposes its views on the rest. What about the two billion people living in China and India who appear to aspire to the same consumerist lifestyle that we have, and who are ever closer to achieving it? Are we proposing to deny the rest of mankind the material well-being to which we have become accustomed and now simply take for granted—even supposing that we could do so, which of course we cannot.

Responding to the Problem

Two common responses are despair and denial. Despair says 'the problem is so intractable there is nothing we can do'. Denial says 'global warming is a myth; there is nothing we need to do; OK, maybe the climate is getting warmer but that is part of a natural cycle which has been going on for tens of thousands of years and has nothing to do with the activity of mankind'. Without going into this discussion further, let us merely note that no serious scientific opinion supports the stance of denial, notwithstanding the irresponsible statements of a number of senior churchmen who take this position. Sadly, denial is, I believe, a disguised form of despair.

So what is a comfortably well-off Christian called to do? Where do we find Christian hope in all this? This was the second theme of my talk, and one which I have continued to pursue ever since.

We have to dig deeper. What are we afraid of? Is there some inevitability here? Is everyone in the world, and for future generations, predestined to aspire to the same materialist, consumerist lifestyle that we now supposedly 'enjoy'? Does humanity really need all this stuff in order to lead a fulfilled life? Indeed, what does it mean to flourish as a human being? What are we here for?

These questions are philosophical and theological. 'What are we here for?' has occupied the attention of serious thinkers throughout most of history. But in the secular West during the twentieth century it became a question that was seldom explicitly asked. We saw ourselves as individuals, 'free' in the narrow sense of the word, with individual choice being the touchstone of social issues. We had more rights than duties. As such we were entitled to pursue our personal needs and

satisfactions, only limited by the constraint of not offending the liberties of others. Where exactly that constraint lay became the subject of narrow political debate between the 'left' and the 'right', who actually held more common assumptions than they were prepared to admit.[4]

Readers of *The Way* will readily assent to the idea that pursuing increased consumption and individual satisfaction is not at all the purpose of human life, and that to flourish as a human being involves a great many other things—loving human relations, some worthwhile work, a belief in the Transcendent and so on. Yet, while assenting to this at an intellectual level, we can nevertheless remain trapped in the very different mindset of the culture in which we live.

In an interesting collection of papers Mary Hirschfeld contrasts the mindset of the world of Thomas Aquinas with that of today. Aquinas took it for granted that the ultimate purpose of human existence is to share in the Divine life and that our deepest desires are directed towards this purpose, so much so that the matter of individual income and wealth scarcely gets considered:

> External goods are necessary only insofar as they provide a platform from which we can pursue virtue. Moreover, as Thomas argues in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, beyond what is necessary for basic survival, further wealth is a matter of indifference with respect to worship.[5]

Importantly, Aquinas' premise here would have seemed perfectly logical to the people of his time. He did not particularly have to argue the point; it was a premise not a conclusion. People had different stations in life and a certain level of material prosperity was appropriate to these different stations, but more than that was neither necessary nor desirable. This mindset seems to carry through right to the beginning of 'modern' times. One does not need much familiarity with the novels of Jane Austen, writing at the beginning of the nineteenth century, to notice how sensitive she is to the particular station that people have in society. She acknowledges, of course, that people may aspire to move up in society—this is an important motive force in her fiction. But income and material wealth, while being necessary to maintain a

[4] Michael Sandel's book *Justice* (London: Penguin, 2010) in effect lays bare the contradictions and sterility of much twentieth-century political discourse.

[5] Mary Hirschfeld, 'From a Theological Frame to a Secular Frame', in *The True Wealth of Nations: Catholic Social Thought and Economic Life*, edited by Daniel K. Finn (New York: Oxford UP, 2010), 181.

particular status, seem of secondary concern. All this is not so far from the world of Aquinas. In short the station in society comes first; personal wealth is only important to the extent that it is necessary to sustain that position. Even more recently we find Keynes, in the 1930s, worrying over the looming problem of leisure: with increasing technological progress, how would everyone occupy their time once people had worked enough hours to earn a sufficient income?[6]

All of this suggests that the secularist, materialist values of the culture we inhabit in the West are of relatively recent origin and by no means immutable. Cultural values have changed in the past and will do so in the future.

Hirschfeld goes on to contrast the mindset of Aquinas' world with that of the secular world in which we now live. A characteristic of the current Western mindset is that questions about why we are here and our relationship with the Transcendent are relegated to the private sphere of life. It is all right to believe in God, so long as that does not get in the way of anyone else's belief. To illustrate her point she draws on Charles Taylor's 'most salient' definition of secularism:

> We function within various spheres of activity—economic, political, cultural, educational, professional, recreational—the norms and principles we follow, the deliberations we engage in, generally don't refer us to God or to any religious beliefs; the considerations we act on are internal to the 'rationality' of each sphere—maximum gain within the economy, the greatest benefit to the greatest number in the political area, and so on.[7]

One consequence of this shift to secularism, at least in Western societies, is that our insatiable desire—which Aquinas (along with countless other theologians) argues is a God-given desire for God—is still there, but its focus has radically shifted away from the transcendent Divine towards material goods and possessions. The decline of religion and 'faith' in the West is actually a rather superficial phenomenon; people are as hungry as ever for meaning and salvation and this hunger is (briefly) satisfied by the monosodium glutamate of consumption. But

[6] See Robert Skidelsky and Edward Skidelsky, *How Much Is Enough: The Economics of the Good Life* (New York: Other Press, 2012).

[7] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard UP, 2007), 2, quoted in Hirschfeld, 'From a Theological Frame to a Secular Frame', 167.

it is still insatiable. As the Tim Jackson comments, 'consumer culture perpetuates itself precisely because it succeeds so well at failure'.[8]

Personally I believe that secularism is in decline. Sadly the mainstream Christian Churches have so far been unable to fill the resulting vacuum in people's lives. Time and again opportunities to spread the Good News and feed people's hunger are missed—the protest camp at St Paul's Cathedral in London being an obvious recent example, when the defence of the institution of the Church of England and its buildings was allowed to override people's thirst for social justice.

Evidence for the decline of secularism can be found in the increasingly visible non-religious debate on human 'flourishing', or what makes for a 'good life'. The growing body of social and psychological studies broadly suggests the following elements to human flourishing: sufficiency (but not more) of material goods; rewarding social relationships; freedom;[9] some degree of physical and material security; worthwhile work; and, finally, some spiritual or religious belief.[10]

According to these studies, once the basic needs of food and shelter have been satisfied, high material consumption is not necessary to live a fulfilled life. Indeed high levels of average income, when they are associated with increasing inequality of income, as has been the case in the UK and the USA over the last generation, actually lead to greater unhappiness.[11] The 2011 riots in many British cities illustrate the point. The rioters were not for or against anything in particular; all they seemed to want was to make off with more consumer goods. They live in a society that does everything possible to create desire for more material possessions while denying a vast underclass any possibility of satisfying that desire.

'Of course', we believers will say, 'all this is what we have known all along!' Numerous biblical stories and parables, not to mention Catholic

[8] Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (London: Earthscan, 2009), 100. Jackson attributes this idea to Grant McCracken; see *Culture and Consumption* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1990), chapter 7.

[9] 'Freedom' is meant here in the sense developed by Amartya Sen and linked to 'capabilities', see Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999).

[10] See for example Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (London: Penguin, 2006) which addresses the topic from a purely secular perspective.

[11] In their book *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone* (London: Penguin, 2009), Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett produce correlation after correlation between income inequality and different aspects of social breakdown.

A looter at Clapham Junction, London, August 2011

Social Teaching, make the point. But we should nevertheless notice and celebrate that psychology and theology begin to coalesce here, while also not being surprised that they do so.

This discussion points towards more hopeful conclusions concerning climate change. First, social and cultural values may appear immutable, but can and do change. In our interconnected world they can change very quickly and encompass all of humankind, not just the prosperous West. Secondly, the radical change in lifestyle, the overcoming of our consumerist addictions, the *metanoia* that we and the people around us need to undergo, is nothing to fear. The materialist god we have been worshipping is no more than an idol. And idols can be overthrown—even though the process may be painful in the short term.

The Gift of the Spiritual Exercises

The first step in overthrowing idols has to be a deep awareness of the extent to which we have become their slaves without really noticing. We need to inculcate a habit of repeatedly asking ourselves: does this material good that I propose to acquire promote the end for which we are created, or not? Is God's purpose better served by throwing away and replacing this broken widget, often the cheapest solution, or repairing it? Is the journey I propose to make sufficiently urgent to justify making

it, say, by car rather than by train? Or necessary at all? Mary Hirschfeld uses the prosaic example of the decision to buy a family dishwasher. She suggests that what might need to be discerned in this case is whether the purchase of a dishwasher undermines family cohesion, as family members no longer gather and commune around the dirty dishes in the sink, or does it rather promote hospitality and conviviality by making it easier to bring family and friends together around a communal table more frequently? Different circumstances will lead to different decisions. A dishwasher in itself is morally neutral.

There is no point in pretending that the task is an easy one—either the discernment or the practice. But only by noticing how deeply and unconsciously we are drawn into the secular culture will we begin to perceive an alternative way forward. The *metanoia* that is called for here may take time and patience. Hirschfeld comments:

> My own experience of transitioning from a secular view to a Catholic/Thomistic worldview is that the changes involved reach very, very deep and that the task of translating from one worldview to the other is actually quite daunting.[12]

Indeed so, and there will be few better occasions to offer the opportunity for such a transition than that given to those, albeit few, who undertake the Spiritual Exercises.

So let us now turn to Ignatius and the Spiritual Exercises. His Principle and Foundation, right at the very beginning of the First Week, echoes Aquinas and hits our nail on the head:

> Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul. And the other things on the face of the earth are created for man and that they may help him in prosecuting the end for which he is created. (Exx 23)

Intellectually this is an argument that Christians take for granted; countless sermons and texts make the point. But the experience of the Exercises is generally a sacred moment in the lives of those making them. It is a moment when what is known in the head begins to become known in the heart. And it offers an opportunity, not necessarily unique but certainly precious, for the *metanoia* that we need to undergo. It can

[12] Hirschfeld, 'From a Theological Frame to a Secular Frame', 181.

and should be a gift: the chance to change our mindset in a deeply fundamental way.

Ignatius offers the tools to do this with his diverse meditations during the Second Week. Of these the Two Standards is the most explicit and serves our purpose best. We are invited, on the one side, to consider the values represented by Christ's standard (or flag), in particular being open to poverty, rejection or humility if these serve God's purpose. Nothing is to be found under this standard about living an affluent, consumerist life! One the other side we are asked to consider the standard of 'the leader of all the enemy powers' and the values that it represents: riches, honour and pride. Importantly it will not always be obvious to those living according to the values of this standard that these are in fact their core values—as water may not be obvious to a fish.

It can be easy enough to focus principally on 'personal' sin,[13] even if, as a good guide will encourage the directee to do, some attention is subsequently given to those political, economic and social injustices of the world that together make up 'social' sin. But this latter can easily become something to bemoan while thinking that there is not much one can do about it. The deeper question is how far we bring to the Two Standards exercise such matters as the choices we make about our material possessions and consumer goods, the values promoted by the newspapers we buy, the importance we attach to mitigating personal risk in various ways, our choices about how and where we travel, how we use our time and so on. The sin of materialism or consumerism, however we describe it, may be less obtrusive than either personal sin or social sin. But, as the Two Standards meditation shows, it is certainly an evil in which we are very easily caught up and which we can actually combat in our personal lives.

The choices we make about our material possessions

Here we face two intellectual obstacles to the necessary change of heart. First, it cannot be denied that humanity's increasing scientific understanding of the material world and technical mastery over it has brought great benefits—at least to those of us who have access to them—less starvation, less suffering through illness and disease, the opportunity to travel easily and to communicate with others in different parts of

[13] In William Barry's guide to the Exercises, *Finding God in All Things: A Companion to the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 1991) he refers to this phenomenon as a 'kind of "me and Jesus" spirituality' (55).

the world. Surely these are all good things; how can we say that they belong to the 'mortal enemy of our human nature' (Exx 136)? Indeed God's instruction to humanity in Genesis to have dominion over the earth (Genesis 1:28–30) can legitimately be interpreted as a blessing that includes scientific and technical progress. So, the more we reject the surrounding materialist culture the more we find ourselves open to the charge that, being prosperous ourselves, we now want to deny prosperity to the rest of humankind who are less fortunate; that we are slipping into a kind of romantic, utopian Luddism. Here again careful discernment is called for. Who are these undoubted good things really benefiting? For example, how much scientific research goes into combating the tropical diseases of the poor, compared with the obesity of the wealthy?

The second obstacle is that, we are told, the modern world needs ever-increasing economic growth and consumption in order just to sustain employment and thereby give people a livelihood and the necessary income to survive. 'How would the world go on without commerce?', someone rhetorically asked me recently. It may well be true that our current economic system is constructed as a treadmill of ever-increasing output and consumption. But there is nothing inevitable about that, and it is perfectly feasible to imagine other economic systems that would distribute prosperity in a different way—as Keynes was doing when he mused on the looming problem of excess leisure.[14]

At this point a second Ignatian insight, one that is little noticed outside the world of Ignatian spirituality, is relevant. This is that evil presents itself as good:

> It is proper to the evil angel, who forms himself under the appearance of an angel of light, to enter with the devout soul and go out with himself: that is to say, to bring good and holy thoughts, conformable to such just soul, and then little by little he aims at coming out drawing the soul to his covert deceits and perverse intentions (Exx 332).

Has our culture and society not been collectively drawn into these 'covert deceits' and 'perverse intentions'?

[14] This is not the place to go into these matters in detail. It suffices to say that, although very little economic research has been done on the matter, it need not be the case that an economy has to keep growing to survive. Indeed the need for continued economic growth was scarcely on the policy agenda until around the 1950s. Keynes was much more concerned with maintaining full employment.

My argument, in short, is that the West has massively aligned itself with the Standard of 'Lucifer, mortal enemy of human nature', and that even those of us with the best intentions find ourselves caught up in this and largely unaware of it—rather like Truman Burbank in the film *The Truman Show*. These are strong words; Ignatius is not content to say that Lucifer is wrong, but that he is the mortal enemy of human nature. The fleeting satisfaction offered by consumerism and the desire for ever more material things are a powerful drug which dulls our deeper desires. And our deepest desire, if only we could unearth it, is what God also wants of us: to live more fully in our God-given human nature.

Overthrowing the Idols

Reaching this point in my reflection restored my hope in the face of a seemingly intractable problem. Climate change and the broader question of the depletion of the Earth's resources demand of all of us not simply technical fixes but a more fundamental change to a much less materialistic lifestyle. We are called to do something about this by careful step-by-step discernment of our choices.

The consumerism and materialism of the society in which we live is a reflection of the prevailing secularist values. These values amount to the worship of a deceptive false god, which has pushed God aside into the 'private sphere'. Yet, from this two more hopeful conclusions follow:

- First, if our lifestyle is based on the worship of a false god there is absolutely nothing to fear about changing it.
- Secondly, we have no reason (perhaps despite appearances to the contrary) to believe that people in other parts of the world are inevitably doomed to worship the same false god and walk the same materialist path as the West.

Bringing simple prosperity to all and meeting the basic needs of the people of the world must be a good thing, but it does not have to lead to the current excesses of the West. False gods crumble; their characteristic is precisely that they are false; they do not bring life. Moreover, we do not need much sense of history to understand that the values that people live by, the matters they consider to be important, are constantly changing—just compare our mindset with that of Aquinas' world. Nor do we need much theology to know that the Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways.

The experience of the Spiritual Exercises offers to those who make them a grace-filled opportunity to turn away from the false standards

that encourage us to waste the resources of God's creation. Of course for them to receive this gift it may first be necessary for those who give the Exercises themselves to become more aware of the snares in which we, as society and culture, have been caught. That is another agenda.

But those who undertake the Exercises will always be few; what difference can they really make? Yet, they will not be alone; there are many others, of all religious affiliations and none, walking the same path. Indeed, the final thrust of the Exercises is to go out and co-operate with others in God's saving work, trusting that all will be well in the end. In this case this includes not worrying too much about the Indians and the Chinese and how their values may evolve, but rather being confident that idols can be overthrown.

In his book *Counterfeit Gods* (which, incidentally, nowhere mentions Ignatius), Timothy Keller reminds us how in Ephesus,

> Paul challenged the gods of the city of Ephesus (Acts 19:26) which led to such an alteration in the spending patterns of the new converts that it changed the local economy. That in turn touched off a riot by the local merchants.

Could something similar happen one day in our society? Keller goes on to challenge us:

> Contemporary observers have often noted that modern Christians are just as materialistic as everyone else in our culture. Could this be because our preaching of the Gospel does not, like St Paul's, include the exposure of our culture's counterfeit gods?[15]

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[15] Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2010), 167.