An Anglican approach to public affairs in a global context

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This article assesses the human impact on life on our planet within an Anglican theological perspective. Its perspective builds on a recognition of the world as God’s creation in the light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and an approach to reading scripture in the context of worship that acknowledges a progressive revelation of God in an ever new and changing world. Anglican theology has traditionally recognised its concern, not only for the life of the church, but also for life in the world at large. While local contexts remain important for the way theological reflection is undertaken, the really big issues today are global and concern the threat posed by humans to all life on Earth including habitat destruction, the pollution of land, air, fresh water and sea, and climate change. These affects are exacerbated by poverty, racism, and the unjust use of power by the rich and powerful against the poor and weak. In all of this, humans constitute a threat to the survival of all life on Earth, and at the same time bear responsibility for finding a way to affirm life for all in the face of the threat of death. For our time a broadly
based ecological hermeneutic is crucial to take account of all these issues, which impact on us specifically and in different ways wherever we happen to be. These issues need to be dealt with locally but within a global strategy. Urgent action is called for on all fronts, not only out of self-interest, but also arising from a theological vision of God and the world embedded in an Anglican theological tradition. That is not to deny this vision to others, but simply to name the source of the vision that has shaped this article.

My remarks are addressed primarily to those responsive to the implications of a theological vision that has the power to transform our way of living in the world. I do so with the awareness that the churches, including the Anglican Church, have not provided an adequate example of the appropriate way of living in and treating the created world. While this includes the way we treat each other, it also includes the way we treat the whole of creation. This article has a message relevant to everyone, whether religious in any sense or not. It is a challenge to acknowledge and observe a ‘reverence for life’, and a warning of the perils for all life if we fail to do so. While I build on the acknowledged findings of scientific specialists on climate and biologists working on the importance of biodiversity and the impact of the growing human presence on biodiversity, most of the world lives in a state of ignorance or denial. The same situation persisted publicly for decades, long after the hazard of smoking tobacco was known by medical specialist. Many people continue to smoke today. In some countries it is endemic. Clearly no-one welcomes the consequences projected as a result of the impact of human life on the world, and that is enough to fuel denial, especially as any course of action to mitigate the consequence of that impact will be difficult and costly. Any alternative will be more costly, and perhaps fatal for humanity and all life.

Before any of these issues can be addressed directly, an account needs to be given of the theological approach that gives rise to a vision of God and creation that is relevant to the world we live in and the critical problems we humans face. Such an approach is in no way an accommodation to the pressures of an ungodly worldview. Rather it is to rediscover the world as God’s creation and to find in this a vision for the life of the world. While this may not be the kingdom of God, it is a move towards expressing the just and loving purpose of God in our world.
Public and contextual theology

In the second half of 2001, my colleague Stephen Pickard and I drafted a submission to Charles Sturt University which led to the establishment of the Public and Contextual Theology (PACT) Research Group in 2002. I was the first Director. In the latter part of 2004 I prepared a second submission that led to PACT becoming a Strategic Research Centre. In both of these submissions I stressed that Public Theology is self-consciously concerned with the public good, which I equate with the older idea of the common good, a description I prefer. In the way I understand God, creation, and incarnation, the common good is the proper outcome of Christian Theology. Because Theology as an intellectual discipline is often more narrowly focused, there is a need to develop a theology that persistently keeps the common good in view, and to develop a vision of the common good that has its source in God the creator, and the incarnate, crucified and risen Lord. There was a time when I might have described this in terms of a vision of human flourishing. With explanation it might be justified because, I would contend, human life will not truly flourish without care for the Earth and all its creatures. But even that is not adequate, or appropriate, because the Earth and its creatures are not seen to be intrinsically valuable, but only valuable because of human need for them.

Contextual theology

Theology is always shaped in an historical context out of which and into which it speaks. The essential contextual nature is nowhere more clearly seen than in the incarnation of the Word in Jesus of Nazareth. The Word was made flesh in the first century, in a Jewish baby boy who grew up in Galilee, perhaps using three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek (or even four, with a little Latin?). Today theology has to grapple with the first century Jewishness of Jesus as it seeks to speak to its own contexts in the twenty-first century. Indeed, Jesus was a Galilean Jew and his distinctive creation theology is a product of his Galilean heritage. In Mark 10:17–18, Jesus combines the observation of Genesis (1:4, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31) that God saw that everything that God created was good (ברLiverpool tōb) and the Psalmist’s acclamation, ‘O give thanks to the Lord for he is good, for his steadfast love endures for ever’ (Psalms 136:1; 100:5; 106:1; 107:1; 118:1–4 and see also 1 Chronicles 16:41; 2 Chronicles 20:21) with the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4),
affirming the oneness of God. Creation and creator are bound together in goodness. God’s goodness is bestowed on the creation and in God’s continuing loving care of it. See the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 6:25–34 (= Luke 12:22–31 = Q), where Jesus responds to his disciples’ anxiety about the uncertainty of life. He appeals to the beauty of the creation and God’s evident care of it as a basis for the recognition of God’s care for humans, including Jesus’ disciples. The argument presupposes the intrinsic worth of the creation to God. I cannot escape this issue. Indeed our present global ecological crisis has made the issue inescapable.4

At the end of an article I later published on Public Theology, I proposed, as the task for another day, reflexion on our Anglican tradition in the context of our place in human history in early twenty-first century Australia.5 I take up that theme in this article. A beginning can be made by focusing on our global context. We are inextricably part of one world, and the nature of the globalism we have produced impacts significantly on every aspect of our lives. Awareness of being part of one world has grown as it has become apparent that human activity in one place affects life in every place, a reality pressed home in the last two centuries. The form of globalism we have created is the expression of the consciousness of the global marketplace where multinational companies seek to operate where production costs are lowest and to sell where consumer prices are highest. One outcome seems to be the stripping of resources from, and exploitation of cheap labour in, the poorer countries.

**Reflexion on our tradition**

At the heart of Anglican tradition is the reading of scripture in the living context of liturgical worship. This context makes explicit the living present relationship with God, who illuminates our understanding and interpretation in the Spirit–illuminated context of liturgical worship. The living context is a reminder that the tasks of biblical interpretation and theological understanding are never finished, because they have to do with the living God in ever new historical contexts. Interpretation and understanding struggle with the fundamental mystery, which is disclosed in fresh ways in every new generation. The mystery of God is inexhaustible, and our understanding is always struggling to grasp the reality of God revealed in the mystery of the world.6 At the same time, the experience of God in worship continues
to illuminate the meaning of scripture as we confront what is new in our world. The mystery of a new world leads us further into the mystery of God.

Encountering the mystery reminds us that all human knowledge is preliminary, partial and fallible. Our knowledge of today is tomorrow modified and developed in the light of new experiences. This process has been described as the hermeneutical circle in which the understanding of today becomes the preliminary understanding of tomorrow. The same process is active in the reading and understanding of scripture. The pre-understanding of the reader shapes interpretation and understanding, but the context in which our interpretation takes place opens our understanding to new ways and insights. New contexts that challenge us have the potential to enable us to interpret anew and arrive at renewed understandings. The mystery of God in the world is always beyond our grasp even if there are growing flashes of insight.

The three great monotheistic faiths (Judaism, Islam and Christianity), rooted in Abrahamic traditions, give expression to understandings of God involving some balance of power, justice and love. The balance is critical. Hermeneutically it seems to me that an ideal typology of the understanding of God in Judaism, Christianity and Islam gives priority to one or other of these three attributes. Yet the reality is that within the three religious communities will be found individuals and groups who affirm the priority of all three attributes. Nevertheless the priority of power is more characteristic of Islam, with its stress on the will of Allah (God); justice characterises Judaism with its focus on Torah; and love is central in the symbol of the cross for Christianity (especially the Johannine, and to a lesser extent the Pauline, streams). These different balances are also found in different strands of the Old Testament.

Reading scripture and the criterion of a progressive revelation of God

Although Article 7 of the 39 Articles of Religion (promulgated by the Convocations of Canterbury and York in 1571) affirms that the ‘Old Testament is not contrary to the New’, it makes clear that the Old Testament laws concerning ceremonies and rites do not bind Christians, nor are the ‘Civil precepts’ mandatory in modern states. These qualifications are made on the Old Testament read in the light of the New Testament. Further, God emerges in differing guises in strands of the Old Testament. In the narrative concerning the recovery and transport of the Ark of the Covenant, Uzzah
and his brother were driving the ox cart that carried the Ark when the oxen stumbled and the Ark might have fallen had not Uzzah reached out his hands to prevent it from falling. Uzzah died. The text says, ‘The anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah; and God struck him there because he reached out his hands to the Ark’ (2 Samuel 6:1–15, especially 6–8). The text also says that, ‘David was angry because the Lord had burst forth with an outburst upon Uzzah’. This portrayal of God as brute power might be qualified in terms of the power of God’s holiness in that the Ark was a holy object related to God’s presence. Even so, the breaking forth of the destructive power of God seems at best only remotely connected to moral holiness.

Abraham’s argument with God over Sodom seems to be a long way from the threatening bursting forth of destructive power. Abraham does not meekly accept God’s verdict on Sodom. Instead Abraham debates and argues with God, a response that fits within a tradition developed further in the Psalms of the righteous sufferer, and especially in Job. It is as if Abraham takes God to task for his decision to destroy Sodom on the basis of God’s known character. ‘Shall not the judge (מִשָּׁפַט mishpat – act justly, Genesis 18:25).’ The point at issue is whether it is just for the righteous to perish with the wicked. The question emerges, how many righteous persons would it take to save Sodom? This is an interesting form of logic. The early church used something like this logic to account for the delay in the destruction of Jerusalem after the execution of Jesus. They argued that the presence of James the Just and the apostles in Jerusalem preserved it. Eusebius attributes to Hegesippus the view that the siege and destruction of Jerusalem occurred immediately after the martyrdom of James the Just, although about eight years probably separated the two events. Eusebius also attributes to Josephus the view that ‘These things happened to the Jews in requital for James the Just, who was a brother of Jesus known as Christ, for though he was the most righteous of men, the Jews put him to death.’ Though these words are not found in our manuscripts of Josephus, Origen also attributes this view to Josephus, and he might be the source of Eusebius’ quotation. Origen also says that Josephus almost got it right, but that the disaster came because of what they did to Jesus rather than to James. Elsewhere Eusebius says that the destruction was coming because of what was done to Jesus but was held back by the presence of James the Just and the apostles in Jerusalem.
The beginning of the story of Abraham is given an interesting introduction that provides a grounding for later episodes as well as an understanding of Abraham’s situation. Although God had not yet called Abraham (Genesis 11:24–32), his father (Terah) took him and his wife Sarai, along with Lot the son of Haran, and departed from Ur of the Chaldees and set out for the land of Canaan. This is precisely the journey God later calls Abraham to make! The journey stalls, however, in Haran (the city) where they settle, and there Terah dies. It is then that the call of God comes to Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3). While the narrative does not supply information about Ur, archaeology and other historical data identify it as a centre for the worship of the moon god with associated human sacrifice. If Abraham was called out of this context it makes sense of his acceptance that the God, who called him and promised him an inheritance (Genesis 12:4–9), was now requiring that he sacrifice his only son Isaac (Genesis 22). Although, in the course of events, Isaac was not sacrificed, the test presupposes that Abraham believed that God was capable of demanding human sacrifice.

The prophet Micah takes us a step beyond sacrifice in responding to the question of what the Lord requires. Having raised the question of whether animal or human sacrifice is pleasing to or required by God (Micah 6:6–7), the answer comes: ‘He has shown you O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice (מְשָׁפָט mishpat), and to love kindness/mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?’ (Micah 6: 8).

In Jonah’s dialogue with God, when God pardoned the people of Nineveh because they repented, Jonah complained to God, ‘Is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing’ (Jonah 4:1–4). While the use of this language in relation to the covenant people would not be so surprising, Jonah is here speaking of God’s relation to a supposedly godless heathen nation. This emerging understanding of the character of God is a key to theological interpretation. The figure of Jonah reveals that we humans are more vindictive than the faithful and loving God who is progressively revealed in the scriptures, at least, so we would say, from the perspective of the Johannine Jesus.

For Christians, Jesus has become the hermeneutical key to the understanding of God, with implications for all aspects of theology. The way God is understood impacts on the vision of the world that emerges in tradition
and such a vision, once shaped, has power to survive in a world that has become inconsistent and resistant to the vision, even if accommodations and adjustments can be made.

The Anglican tradition is a deep and rich stream of interpretation and understanding capable of being renewed and of renewing those who draw on it. I wish to highlight twin themes that unite the two parts of scripture with the focus on God the creator (Genesis) and revealer in such a way that the created world is affirmed in relation to God’s continuing work. This is nowhere clearer than in the Prologue of the Gospel of John. The Gospel sets both the creation of the world and the Incarnation of the Word in the context of God’s love for the world, so that the Incarnation is to be seen as God entering into the struggle to bring creation to completion from within creation itself. The fulfilling of the purpose of God is only possible with this deep communion between God and the creation – God in creation. Drawing on the Anglican tradition of reading these twin themes we may find a solid basis for engaging ‘worldly’ concerns in a fundamentally Christian manner. Focus here on God and creation, God and the world, leads us to the observation that, in our time, place has become less important because the big issues facing all humanity are global and need to be dealt with globally, for example, climate, poverty, and racial discrimination, conflict and terrorism. All of these deserve detailed attention. Here we can only make a beginning.

A new climate

The understandings that emerged in scripture and subsequent interpretations in creeds and councils are all shaped by their historical contexts with the issues and categories of their time. They are not timeless expressions of truth. Recognition of this reality has never been more important than in our own time. Sally McFague captures this awareness in the title of her book, A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming. This title is both clever and deeply relevant to the situation in which theology now must be done. The words, ‘A New Climate,’ play on the reality of climate change as the most prominent aspect of the most serious set of problems of our time, perhaps the most serious problems ever confronted by humans. A range of specific problems that contribute to climate change also have their own independent destructive consequences for life on Earth. I refer, for example, to habitat destruction and various forms of pollution. Climate change is one prominent symptom of a whole range of problems, something
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now commonly overlooked with the focus, although little action, on dealing with climate change.

The one constant about the Earth’s climate is that it is ever changing. What is new is that we humans have now become a huge factor in producing climate change. There are two major reasons for this. First, the industrial, scientific, and technological revolutions have followed in swift succession giving humans more power to change the planet for good or ill than any species has ever wielded before. Second, in the period from 1900 to 2000, the human population has virtually exploded from just one billion to over six billion, and the rate of the growth continues to accelerate. The sheer weight of human numbers already threatens all other life forms, especially now with the destructive power that flows from intended actions and unintended consequences. Though already critically serious, the human population is predicted to reach nine billion before it peaks later this century. It will peak because of the now foreseen cataclysmic consequences produced by the burden of human population. Climate change of the sort that threatens all life forms is only one factor. The destruction of the habitats of other species threatens the biodiversity of the interdependent web of life that undergirds all life. Biodiversity is crucial for the health and survival of all life and the loss of any species impoverishes us all. The previous century has been a disaster when viewed from the perspective of the destruction of habitat and extinction of species, a process in which Australia sadly has led the way. In this destructive environment, climate change is but one consequence of the deadly cocktail we have produced by our careless destruction of other species and their habitats by our rapidly increasing population and in our endless quest to satisfy our greed and selfishness.

The destruction of the habitats of many species through the clearing of forests, and the pollution of land, atmosphere and waterways (rivers, lakes and oceans), continue apace without concern for future generations, let alone for other species. Yet the well-being and survival of our species depends on biodiversity. We humans have behaved as if the world is a store of commodities, all at our disposal. The reality is that we humans are embedded in the Earth; we are part of a fragile web of life in which all parts are interdependent. The web is constituted by a rich biodiversity, which is being seriously depleted as a consequence of careless destructive behaviour. How much of this web of life can be destroyed before the survival of all life is threatened? Part of the problem is simply the sheer weight of numbers,
as the human population increases. It is of course worsened by the high demand for, and wasteful use of, resources without concern for other species.

Yet, there is in the creation theology of Judaism and Christianity a celebration of the wonder and mystery of life found so richly and diversely in the Earth and this meets what the American biologist Edward O Wilson describes in his understanding of Charles Darwin as ‘Darwin’s reverence for life.’16 I wonder whether he would have used that phrase had not Albert Schweitzer already coined it by the northern summer of 1915.17 These three words, reverence for life, became a powerful vision for him in his attempt to encapsulate adequately the nature of the Christian ethic. Today they seem more relevant than ever before as we have come to understand the dependence of all life on biodiversity and the interdependence of all life as it is embedded in the fragile web of life. Though this knowledge is now common and public, we do not seem to have the corporate will or strength to deal with the consequences of our greed in the light of our growing numbers.

I have coined the 1960s formula concerning mutual responsibility and interdependence in the body of Christ to illuminate our consciousness of our place as part of the life of the Earth. In developing the concept of reverence for life, Albert Schweitzer recognised the ‘mutual dependence’ of all life and drew attention to the distinctive human responsibility grounded in ethical consciousness and our ability to change the Earth for the good or ill of all life. Our consciousness makes our responsibility significant, though all life shares in the fulfilling of the purpose of the Earth. Our awareness and ability mean that we can consciously direct life on Earth for good or ill, making us responsible.

Theology and an ecological hermeneutic

Given the gravity of the situation confronting all life on Earth, an ecological hermeneutic should govern our theological work at the present time. An attempt to develop such an approach was made by the Earth Bible Project initiated by the Adelaide-based theologian Norman Habel.18 He outlines six principles that were developed in dialogue with ecologists like Charles Birch (1918–2009), to mention only the most outstanding scientific voice in this conversation. Birch was for decades one of the world’s leading biologists. He was Challis Professor of Biology at the University of Sydney from 1963 to 1983 and helped lay the foundation of the new science of ecology. He has also been one of the outstanding Australian voices in the area of science and
theology and its leading voice in the area of ecological theology for which he was awarded the Templeton prize in 1990 for his work on the intrinsic value of all life. His views on this subject have been widely influential and are reflected in the recognition of the importance of biodiversity.

Summarily the six principles can be stated as: the intrinsic value of the Earth and all its parts; the interconnectedness and mutual dependence of all living things; recognition that Earth has a voice raised in celebration and in protest against injustice; Earth and all its components are part of a dynamic cosmic design in which each part has its place in achieving the goal; Earth is a balanced and diverse domain in which responsible custodians can function as partners with the Earth to maintain its balance and diversity; Earth and its parts not only suffer human injustices, but actively resist in the struggle for justice.

In three successive Society of Biblical Literature consultations on Ecological Hermeneutics in the United States (2004–2006), these principles were concentrated into a three part radical ecological approach of suspicion, identification and retrieval. Suspicion is necessary because of a traditional dominance of anthropocentric interpretation, which is frequently patriarchal (and androcentric) as well. From this perspective, texts expressing the intrinsic value of the Earth and its non-human parts are frequently treated metaphorically and redirected in an anthropocentric way. Suspicion also applies to the text. It was shaped in an anthropocentric and patriarchal cultural context. The emergence within these texts of intimations of the intrinsic value of Earth and its non-human parts is a key criterion for interpretation in our time. Especially important are the texts in Genesis in which the stages of creation are described and the narrator progressively tells the reader, ‘And God saw that it was good’ ( כְּאָדַב tōb Genesis 1:4, 12, 18, 21, 25). Then, after the creation of humankind, God surveys the whole of the creation and ‘indeed it was very good’ (Genesis 1:31). Although the narrative has an anthropocentric orientation, it contains within it an affirmation of the intrinsic worth of the creation as a whole and of its component parts.19

The value of the Earth and its parts is celebrated in Psalms such as 24 (‘The Earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it; for he has founded it upon the seas, and established it on the rivers’) and Psalm 95 (‘For the Lord is a great God, and a great king above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the Earth; and the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his and he made it, and the dry land, which his hands
have formed’). The Psalmist certainly does not think of the sea as some primordial reality pre-existing creation. Rather, God created the sea along with the dry land and the creatures of the Earth, all of which is celebrated as God’s creation by the Psalmist. ‘O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the Earth is full of your creatures. Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it’ (Psalm 104:24–26). This reference to Leviathan (one of only three in the Old Testament) implies intrinsic worth, formed to sport, take pleasure, in the sea. Indeed, the celebration of the wonderful diversity of God’s creation in this Psalm lacks any utilitarian perspective.

Because this theme is so important for doing theology today, further reference is made to the New Testament to support the recognition of the intrinsic worth of the Earth and all its parts. Three Johannine points are worth making. In the Prologue the narrator tells of the creation of all things by the divine Logos and emphatically reaffirms ‘all things were made by him’ (John 1:3). Creation by the Logos implies the intrinsic value of all things. Then in the Incarnation the creator became part of the creation, again affirming its worth. Further, the Gospel affirms God’s love for the world (John 3:16). The world loved by God is valuable. In the light of creation theology it is a mistake to move too quickly to a metaphorical understanding of world as an exclusive metaphor for humanity. To read the text from the perspective of creation is to read it as creatures of Earth, members of Earth community, in solidarity with the Earth.

The Earth is the fragile web of life of which we, and all life, are part. This recognition is a strand present in the biblical tradition. Humans were created from the dust of the Earth and return to the dust (Genesis 2:7; 3:19). All flesh is like grass that withers and fades away (Isaiah 40:6–8). Humans are like other living creatures in whom is the breath of life (Genesis 2:7; 1:28, 30). This ecological view of Earth as a fragile web of life in which all parts are interdependent is obscured in the Bible, and especially by the anthropocentric reading that is our heritage. This reading has its roots in the biblical tradition in the strand that emphasises human difference from the rest of creation, made in the image of God and given dominion over the Earth and the commission to subdue the Earth (Genesis 1:26–28). Though other creatures are also to be fruitful and multiply, it is only humans who
are to subdue the Earth and to have dominion over other creatures (Genesis 1:22 and cf. 1:28).

The tension between these two strands has in the past been resolved in favour of the stress on human difference and dominance. Suspicion of this perspective can lead us to the retrieval of the other theme and our identification with the Earth so that dominion is modified in the direction of a mutual caring for the Earth of which we are part. Yet we humans tend to use the Earth as a resource for our own ends although such exploitation has disastrous consequences for the fragile web of life of which we are part. Suspicion of the tendency to anthropocentricism is a first step in this hermeneutic, which is followed by an identification of human life and destiny with the Earth, and the retrieval of the voice of the Earth in celebration and the cry for justice for the Earth. The work of retrieval is necessary because the voice of the Earth is muffled and blocked by interpretative strategies that have become commonplace, and made easy by texts that were shaped by cultures that were/are anthropocentric and patriarchal. Just as a feminist hermeneutic has called attention to the way patriarchal readings have led to more extreme interpretations of texts that already had patriarchal tendencies, the same task needs to be done by an ecological hermeneutic. The voice of the Earth that has been obscured in the text and its interpretation now needs to be liberated so that we hear the call for justice for the Earth and all its creatures. We need also to join our voices with the voice of the Earth in celebrating the marvels and mysteries of creation and of the loving Creator whose bounties we enjoy. In this celebration there is the opportunity to ensure that all of the Earth’s creatures share in this bounty in a way that makes the Earth richer and more fecund rather than a plundered and barren wasteland.

Theology human sexuality and the ecological crisis

It is ironic that with this daunting threat to all life on our planet, the issue preoccupying and threatening to tear the Anglican Communion apart at present is homosexuality.21 Given the destructive consequences of the multiplication of humans and of our domination of the Earth, sexuality is a serious theological problem. Traditional Christian theology has taken the complementarity of human sexuality as a basis for regarding procreation as the primary purpose of sexuality and of marriage. Genesis 1:26–28 begins with the deliberation, ‘Let us make humans in our image and likeness, and
let them have dominion over the Earth and all life on it.’ So God created humans in God’s own image, male and female, and concludes with the command, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the Earth and subdue it; and have dominion over ... every living thing that moves upon the Earth.’

Given that this mandate arises out of God’s deliberation about the creation of humans, it apparently has the force of a mission statement. True, all the sea creatures and birds of the air were also commanded to ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the Earth.’ Although no such commission was given to all the living creatures on Earth (Genesis 1:24–25), sandwiched between the command to the sea creatures and birds (1:22) and the command to humans (1:28), such a commission to land animals might be implied. Certainly they too were fruitful and multiplied. Only humans were created to have dominion over the Earth and all life on Earth. They were to be fruitful and to multiply and fill the Earth and subdue it. Our hermeneutical approach has already argued that the theme of dominance needs to be modified by its tension with the theme of humans as children of the Earth along with other creatures. So we turn to the implications of the treatment of human sexuality in Genesis.

In a world groaning under the impact of a burgeoning human population, we humans need to struggle afresh with the nature of human sexuality. The opening exhortation of the marriage service in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer (BCP) outlines three causes for which marriage was ordained: first, for the procreation of children; second, as a remedy against sin, to avoid fornication; and third, for the mutual society, help and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other. In biblical times the larger family was a key to survival, a factor that underlies the priority given to procreation in the Genesis tradition, which finds expression in the BCP. Today the multiplication of the human population threatens all life on the planet. At the very least, in the present world, these priorities need to be reversed.

Glenn Davies and Michael Stead note that the Reformation view of the BCP departs from the negative ascetic attitude to sexuality. The BCP portrayed marriage ‘as an honourable estate, instituted by God in the time of man’s innocency’ and as a symbol of the relation between Christ and his church. But they recognise that it did not go far enough. The three causes of marriage as stated in the BCP underplay the significance of the relational union of marriage. They also note that the sixteenth century Reformer, Martin Bucer (1491–1551), stands out in a way that has been matched by
the churches only in the last eighty or ninety years. Bucer wrote, ‘I should prefer that what is placed third among the causes might be in the first place, because it is first. For a true marriage can take place between people who seek neither for children nor for a remedy against fornication.’22 This is a move in the right direction, yet from the perspective of our time, the third cause is deficient even when placed first, because it insufficiently expresses the mutually loving relationship intended in marriage. This goes beyond and undergirds the ‘mutual society, help and comfort’ expressed in the third cause. The prioritising and deepening interpretation of this purpose in marriage is a beginning. Unfortunately, Davies and Stead failed to take account of the important and radical implications of Bucer’s recognition that ‘a true marriage can take place between people who seek neither for children nor for a remedy against fornication.’

Does the complementarity of the sexes in Genesis support the view that the primary, or at least, an essential purpose of marriage is procreation? Bucer certainly rejected this view. In the time of Genesis, the human population was relatively sparse. Robert Gagnon recognises the impact on the Earth of the human population explosion, but continues to use sexual complementarity as an argument for the essential procreative purpose of sexuality and as an argument against homosexuality.23 He fails to confront the issue of childless marriages and maintains that procreation remains an important purpose of marriage, suggesting that the Priestly writer would have maintained the mandate even had he known of the overpopulation of our time. He allows that ‘the P writer might have allowed for fewer children per couple’. The question is, fewer than what number? Clearly he regards the procreation of children as essential to marriage, thus ruling out the legitimacy of homosexuality. Nowhere does he take the human population explosion seriously or consider the legitimacy of childless marriages. In this he mirrors the concentration of the Anglican Church on this controversy along with other mainline churches. His casual dealing with the human population explosion and the problems for the Earth that flow from it is hardly serious. His view is no different from the views of Glenn Davies and Michael Stead who conclude that:

the mandate to multiply and fill the Earth was designed to be achieved through the procreation of children through the sexual act ... In the present the mandate to be fruitful
and multiply and fill the Earth still remains, but this is an injunction for this world only.

Though they raise the question of our present situation there is no glimmering awareness of the human population problem and the impact of this on our understanding of the procreative purpose of sexuality in our time.24 Neither Gagnon nor Davies and Stead show any awareness of the impact of an overwhelming human population, exacerbated by the destructive use of fossil fuels, the destruction of habitats, and careless disposal of polluting waste products.

I can see no solution to the threat to all life on our planet if the growth of the human population is not checked. Unfortunately, Churches and religious groups generally have given no constructive lead on this issue. There is a need for the development of a more adequate theology of sexuality, if the Churches and religious groups are to become part of the solution rather than exacerbating the problem. Further, the delicate problem of encouraging the developing world to control population growth needs to overcome the justifiable suspicion that the rich and powerful seek to control the weak and the poor. Significant change is unlikely to happen without a more just sharing of the Earth’s resources and the development of better relations between ethnic, cultural and religious groups.

There is need to preserve the Earth itself that the Earth and all life on it may flourish together. It is not enough that humans find better ways to live with less destructive consequences for the planet. For the love of the world (Earth), ways need to be found to limit the growth of the human population, indeed to reduce the overall population. Humans now live at the expense of the survival of other species. Even now a best possible outcome might be the survival of 60–70 per cent of presently surviving species.25 To maintain biodiversity and strengthen the fragile web of life, human sexuality needs to be rethought. Religious authorities who continue to urge believers to ‘be fruitful and multiply and fill the Earth and subdue it’ are irresponsibly ignoring the present situation, which brings a new perspective to bear on the old mandate. Human sexuality finds expression in a deep and abiding human love as a basis of community or family. Procreation, and the birth of children in the context of a loving relationship remain important, but within the limits that allow other species to flourish. Only then will there be a rich and diverse Earth life for our children and our children’s children.
Climate change is affecting life on Earth in geographically different ways. Low-lying Pacific Island communities are threatened by rising sea levels. Australia, the driest continent on Earth, is likely to get dryer, especially in the areas of human population concentration in the south-eastern part of the continent. With the human population explosion of the last century projected to accelerate into the future, fresh water looms as an increasingly critical scarce resource along with an equitable distribution of food. We need to relearn what proved to be a dominating truth for the ancient world – the truth of the finite good. Paradoxically, even what is renewable is finite! Thus, equity is critical.

The reality of economic globalism calls for mutual responsibility and interdependence to counteract the global exploitation of the poor and weak by the rich and strong. That the world can and does respond to specific ‘natural disasters’ like a tsunami, earthquake, flood, or tornado, is encouraging. The world is less responsive to chronic disastrous situations produced by the way we humans have ordered the world. The language of mutual responsibility and interdependence was used in the ecclesiology of the 1960s and 1970s but lost its power through clichéd use. It now needs to be recovered universally in committed practice. In the fragile web of life in which we have our being, we humans have the awareness, and the knowledge of our mutual interdependence in that web of life. Such knowledge, and the ability to wield it for the good or ill of all life, makes us responsible before God and the world.

This knowledge calls for a reverence for all life. Albert Schweitzer developed this concept as the expression of his recognition of the mystery and sanctity of all life and of the mutual interdependence of all life. His position was ridiculed by his critics who failed to recognise the subtlety of his views. He recognised that all life has value but we humans, by virtue of our knowledge of both what are doing and the consequences of our actions, are in the position where we must choose what lives and what dies. Reverence for life affirms that what promotes life is good while what diminishes it is bad. It is now widely recognised that humans continue to inflict much unnecessary suffering on other life forms and have carelessly brought about the extinction of many species. Schweitzer was a forerunner of those who emphasise the importance of biodiversity. His argument was fundamentally
ethical, although he also recognised the mutual interdependence of all life. Here the work of Charles Birch is significant in gaining recognition of the importance of biodiversity. In the web of life we can survive the destruction of some fibres in the web but at some point the whole web will begin to unravel.

Achieving an effective response to the problems of climate change and the degradation of the Earth is made the more difficult by an exploitative form of economic globalism, which accentuates the differences between rich and poor, powerful and weak in a way that produces suspicion and antagonism between ethnic, cultural, and religious groups. A global solution to the issues that ultimately threaten all life on Earth may only be possible through a more just sharing of the bounty of the Earth by all of Earth’s creatures.

Related global issues

Poverty
Mutual responsibility and interdependence call for an acceptance of the need to address and overcome the disparity of rich and poor nations and rich and poor within nations where the rich and powerful exploit the poor and the weak. I suggest that a world of such disparity is unsustainable and that we will know no peace while injustice breeds support for terrorism. This is a negative argument for mutual responsibility and interdependence (see Galatians 5:13–15). The positive argument from within the faith of our tradition is God’s love for the world, which calls us to participate in God’s loving purpose for the world in an equitable sharing of the Earth’s resources with all of God’s creatures.

Multiculturalism and racism
The cultural diversity of the world is present in our own country. In particular, our history demands that we attend to the place of Australia’s aboriginal people and their plight in modern society. This is urgent because the situation is a consequence of the past injustices that continue to be perpetuated in the present. Many have embraced Christianity in some form. Here indigenous beliefs and practices need to be given more room to illuminate and express Christian faith. Then we have significant communities of Jewish and Muslim Australians of various ethnic backgrounds. Nor should we overlook other less prominent groups, such as Buddhist and Sikh, who are less ethnically diverse. With all it is important to allow for God in creation, because
everywhere there are signs of the presence of God to which people may respond. We need to be ready to find intimations of the presence of God in creation and human life generally. At the same time, careful attention needs to be given to the problem of discrimination based on cultural (including religious) factors, as well as discrimination based on colour and ethnicity. Yet, cultural differences should not be allowed to justify the oppression of the weak and the poor in any way. What is easy to state in general terms here is, in fact, complex to unravel and apply in practice.

The problems of poverty and of discrimination based on ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity, need to be addressed locally but with a global strategy. In our time, the local is often a microcosm of the global. Without an evident response to local injustices, any global intervention lacks credibility. Credibility at the global level is crucial because armed interventions have been common in the past, and these have aroused suspicion about the motive of those who intervene. Suspicion grows because, though each nation is divided into rich and poor, the division between rich and poor nations is more significant. This is often characterised as the division between East and West, or Europe and its colonial foundations as constituting the rich Western nations over against the rest. If that seems to suggest that Europe somehow generated the wealth, there may be some truth in that. But it did so by exploiting many other parts of the world. Although most of the colonies have now become independent, the effects of exploitation have not been removed but the imbalance of power has not been redressed. So there is suspicion on the one side and the habit of exploitation on the other, with huge differences between the lives of those with colonial roots and the ‘original population.’ Because of this, any effective global response to the issues that threaten life on Earth has become problematic, undermined by suspicion on the one hand, and greed on the other.

Although the rich nations contribute much more than their share to the problems that threaten all life, their leaders have often argued that all nations must meet the same goals in the reduction of the production of harmful waste products. This takes no account of the need of poor nations to develop to something like parity with developed nations. Then there is the population problem where the more populous nations with high birth rates are generally less developed. Population growth and economic development are currently a deadly cocktail.
Per head of population, Australia ranks as the worst of all nations in greenhouse gas emissions. A common political argument has been, and is still to be heard, that our emissions are insignificant in the context of world emissions. This argument has been used as a basis for inaction. Those who use it lack any awareness of taking a fair share of responsibility. Nevertheless, the most serious single problem is the continuing explosion of the human population. It threatens life on Earth, especially as it is concentrated where development needs to and will take place. The old argument that rising living standards will slow population growth is cold comfort if the best scientific projections of population growth and its consequences are somewhere near the truth. To conclude, I can only pose a number of questions for which only provisional answers can be given. But I have no good grounds for confidence that we humans will respond adequately to the problems the questions reveal.

Can life, as we know it, survive if the human population continues to multiply? I doubt it. Indeed, I wonder if human life will survive. Are current lifestyles sustainable in developed countries, even if population stabilises? I doubt it. I guess that this, and the previous response, is optimistic understatement. Will the less developed nations respond to the challenge to reduce harmful emissions if the more developed and richer nations fail to share the wealth more equitably than they have in the past? I doubt it. Will the more developed and richer nations support the development of poorer nations? I can only hope. Will the more developed and richer nations countenance a reduction in living standards so that poorer nations may become equal sharers in the bounty of the Earth and with an overall reduction in the human impact on the Earth? I can only hope.

Within nations, will the rich renounce obscene and wasteful luxury with its inordinate impact on life on Earth, so that the poor may live? I can only hope. Can we humans learn to consider the wellbeing of other life forms on Earth, recognising that the wellbeing of all life is interdependent? I can only hope. Can developments in technology reduce the impact of the human footprint to allow the survival of life on Earth? I expect significant development, but will they be enough and in time? I doubt that such developments can succeed without positive changes in human lifestyle and a limiting, indeed a reduction, of human population. And where is God in all of this? God’s will is for life, and our task is to further God’s will and purpose, even when the odds seem to be insurmountable.
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Notes


2. See EU insight October 2009, from Delegation of the European Commission to Australia and New Zealand. The issue deals with ‘Climate Change: a global problem requiring a global solution.’ It reports, ‘That human emissions of greenhouse gases are causing this warming is considered very likely (90 per cent chance) by the respected International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and a majority of scientists working in the field.’ The issue goes on to report more rapid warming than predicted in the IPCC Report of 2007, and consequent worsening consequences.


4. Since preparing this article the emergence of the global financial crisis has underlined this point. It has also worsened the ecological disaster that threatens all life by weakening resolve to deal with it and by diverting attention and resources to deal with economic concerns. Too often ecological concerns are traded off to achieve supposed economic benefits, although the ecological consequences of the failure to act may have disastrous economic implications.


7. The linguistic connection in the Hebrew for judge and justice should not be overlooked.


13. An observation related to the Gaia principle, developed from 1979 in the writings of James Lovelock, especially *The Revenge of Gaia: Why the Earth is Fighting Back: and how we can still save Humanity*, Basic Books, 2006. Lovelock has been an advocate of the need to use nuclear generation of clean power to meet the growing needs of the world while reducing harmful greenhouse gases. Balancing the risks of contamination from nuclear waste, and the danger of the proliferation of nuclear weapons, against the consequences of increased greenhouse gases is an unenviable task. If no significant advances are made in ‘clean coal,’ and in solar, wind, and other clean energy technologies, the use of nuclear power generation might become unavoidable to meet the demands of a growing human population.


15. See Wilson, *The Creation*, p. 11.


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21. Sallie McFague notes with dismay that the churches are still focused on the narrow issues of personal, mainly sexual morality. She asks if these are the most pressing issues of our time, rather than another vision of life on Earth bound up with justice and sustainability, a vision in which all creatures might flourish. See her A New Climate for Theology, p. 1.


23. See Robert AJ Gagnon, The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics, Abingdon, Nashville, 2001, pp. 58, 132, 270, 272, 273. In addition to the purpose of procreation of children (Genesis 1:26–28), Gagnon appeals to 1 Corinthians 7:2–5 where Paul recommended marriage to avoid fornication, thus adopting the first two purposes found in the BCP.


25. See Wilson, The Creation, pp. 91–9, 171.
