

Faithful Citizenship

Principles and Strategies to Serve the Common Good

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I Agree, But Do Not Neglect the Population Question

Response to Misleh

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Introduction

[1] As “respondent” I will comment about the positive features and limitations of Misleh’s paper from my perspective (about which I will say a bit more before I finish). I think the paper shares some virtues and limitations of many similar recent statements by religious institutions and agencies by a diverse variety of faiths (Christian and otherwise) about environmental issues and climate change in particular (see Gardner). There is much to admire in Misleh’s paper, and let me begin by noting some of its virtues.

Virtues

[2] First, it recognizes the seriousness of environmental problems. We are on the cusp of an utterly transformed biophysical environment. Moreover, many dimensions of that transformation are anthropogenic. The report recognizes that we are living through the largest human-induced wave of the biodiversity extinction since that which took place during the Cretaceous Age 65 million years ago that ended the age of dinosaurs. The world would be greatly impoverished by such a die-off, because the diversity of species provide many

services that maintain ecosystems, have significant economic value, represent the world's evolutionary heritage (in terms of species and DNA) as God's creation. In the same vein, the report emphasizes the serious potential consequences posed by global climate change: a warmer and probably a drier planet, altered rainfall patterns, a lower capacity to produce food, as well as the likely global social and political disruptions that would ensue. Misleh cites a Yale ecologist that such changes would be connected with a destruction of the earth's human life support systems and the eruption of political and military disruptions. No one could read Misleh's report seriously and still believe that addressing such problems is only a "nice option." It reaffirms that humans are utterly dependent on global biophysical systems, and that degrading them represents an assault on the sacred and bountiful creation of God.

[3] Second, the report emphasizes the fragmentation of human responses to problems, using poverty to illustrate, but noting similar kinds of responses to problems and climate change. Misleh notes responses to problems by (1) individuals and families, (2) communities, which should include affiliational ones like those based on religion, recreation, and occupation as well as residential ones, (3) markets, and (4) governmental responses. These are different "dimensions of human life" and institutions (or "foundational structures," as Misleh calls them) and not only ways of responding to problems but are also modalities and mechanisms by which the "deeper" causes of problems are connected with their important consequences. They are not only responses to problems, which Misleh rightly argues are often fragmented, contradictory, and incoherent, but they could be the bases for the creation of more effective, integrated, and practical ways (with ideas, information, and programs) to address the serious problems connected with global climate change.

[4] Drawing from the document of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) about Faithful Citizenship, Misleh cites, extends, and adapts several assumptions to address Climate Change. They are about (1) prudence, (2) the promotion of the common good, (3) the protection of the poor, (4) the importance of debate and dialogue, and (5) the safeguarding of life.

[5] It is important that Misleh emphasizes *prudence* as a normative criterion to think about such problems. It is used here to mean virtually the same principle referred to by environmental scientists as the "precautionary principle," meaning that that "when there is evidence that a human activity can harm our health or bring about changes in environmental conditions that can affect economies or quality of life, we should take measures to prevent harm even if some of the cause-and-effect relationship have not been established scientifically" (Miller; Dietz and Rosa 1998: 236-37). To illustrate, the probability of our homes burning down is small, yet we do purchase expensive home insurance in the event of such a giant catastrophe. In terms of large-scale policy, during the cold war we spent millions on military preparedness for a thermonuclear war that never materialized. Climate change is similar: even though the exact cause-and-effect relationships, its timing and magnitude are not known with certainty (though there are predictive models) the most prudent course is to act (even though expensive) because the potential consequences are so vast and negative.

[6] In connection with the "promotion of the common good," Misleh's adaptation of the position paper of the USCCB emphasizes two important dimensions that are different but certainly related. First, that promoting the common good in such a *hyper-individualistic world* as

ours is difficult. It is a world with a culture that leads us to articulate, defend, and extend individual rights more than community rights. So we emphasize rights to property, to speak and do as we wish, to have more red meat in our diet, and to consume an over-proportionate share of human services of the earth's resources. But individual rights are not absolute: they have limits when they have negative consequences for humans taken collectively or in community (or, by extension, the biophysical world. That, at least, has been traditional Catholic teaching as I understand it. I agree.

[7] Second, Misleh importantly emphasizes the importance of rampant *consumerism* often having corrosive impacts on the promotion of the common good. Taking for granted the rights to drive large inefficient vehicles as much as we want, to live in large, new, and expensively constructed homes, to regularly "eat out" and consume meat-rich diets, to use as much energy as we wish (and thus amplify our demands on the earth's resources and our contribution of greenhouse gases). Many other things could illustrate the powerful *cultural complex of consumerism* America which, in a globalizing world is being transmitted via the media, advertising, and cultural contacts around the world (to, for instance, places like India and China). Consumption is necessary for life. Consumerism is something quite different. The cultural language of American consumerism can be simply summarized with the word "more" and though the word "enough" certainly exists, it is rarely used when many Americans describe their aspirations. Though materialism is not sanctioned by any of the world's faiths, consumerism in American life is established in America's history, culture, institutions, and economy.

[8] A story that aired on National Public Radio (NPR) this month about one family's move to the suburbs graphically illustrates.

Atlanta, part one: The newscast focused on a family that moved from the congestion of urban Atlanta to their suburban "dream house," with 3,000 square feet, five bedrooms, a two-car garage, and a big yard. It was (and still is) their dream house, but, there are problems. Commutes are long (an hour and a half each way, which leaves little discretionary or family time), they use lots of gasoline, filling up their auto with 20 gallons every five days or so at more than \$60.00 each time. There are so many commuters on the freeway that rush hour traffic often crawls at 16 miles per hour (the official speed limit is 65). The larger house and yard require more maintenance, and in 2008 the natural gas bill was almost \$300/month. The average Atlantan with a job drives between 30 and 60 miles every day, and commutes are so long because there were no natural barriers to Atlanta's urban sprawl. While family in the NRP report is aware of the blows their lifestyle delivers to their time and budget, they are not as aware of its impact on global climate change: their ecological footprint is at least 4 times that of those living in older parts of the city. Still, when weighing all of their priorities they are happy with the decision to move to a bigger, newer, suburban home (Shogren 2008a).

I will return to the Atlanta story.

Commentary, Extensions, and Limitations

[9] Environmental scholars and activists are delighted that in the last several decades, almost without exception, the churches have collectively joined efforts to protect the environment and developed programs and programmatic statements about environmental protection – and about climate change in particular. Indeed churches in America and religious communities around the world have a unique potential to promote reforms (in terms of numbers of adherents who can potentially be mobilized for moral causes, and as “keepers” of the canons of moral authority) (Gardner; Harper). The historic role of the churches on behalf of the abolition of slavery, extending human and civil rights, combating racial hatred, in legitimating trade unionism come easily to mind.¹ Yet exercising moral authority has limits, among the faithful and in shaping policy within the larger social order. In the run up to the war in Iraq in 2002 there were massive entreaties from Protestant and Orthodox denominations, religious orders, Pope John Paul II, and the National Council of Churches strongly urging President Bush not to go to war. But surveys found that solid majorities of Catholics and Protestants supported the war, and that 78% of local leaders (ministers, rabbis, priests) had not mentioned the war, or had done so without taking a position (Churches for Middle East Peace; Feuerherd).

[10] I am sure that all connected with reforms directed at reducing the human footprint and mitigating climate change realize that they are *hard* sells, involving as they must compromising the consumerist dream, and getting affluent Americans even remotely similar to the couple from Atlanta to scale down their affluence and “the good life.” Even though it is a hard sell, it is important to try it anyway. Though its problems and dysfunctions are apparent, we remain attached to the American consumerist vision. Its benefits are often personal, concrete and, and ‘here and now.’ Its dysfunctions seem collective, on a large and somewhat abstract scale, and often manifest in still distant time horizons. Efforts to address climate change and reduce the human footprint on the earth will engender resistance, and conflict and argumentation, not only in the broader social order, but among communities of the faithful, as the Misleh report recognizes. He rightly argues that such conflicts should not be ignored, but that addressing them could become a “new way of expressing solidarity and promoting the common good.” Well, yes, but a hard sell nonetheless.

[11] Part of the problem is that change in the consumerist lifestyle is always seen as giving up benefits, and “scaling down” ones living standard, well-being, and conveniences. Reforms should be honest about this but they should also emphasize the gains in the quality of life that scaling down “life in the fast lane” could entail. Consider another family from Atlanta.

Atlanta part two: A woman and her 11 year old daughter lived in a typical but somewhat older suburb, and moved back into the city four years ago. They

¹ Moral reforms for the faithful aside, Churches themselves collectively have significant ecological footprints. The U.S Environmental Protection Agency estimated that congregations serious about reducing energy consumption could save 25-30%. A 25% energy use reduction by half of the nation’s congregations would have the same effect as removing a million cars from the roads. It would make available 13.5 billion kilowatt hours of electricity for other uses, without the construction of new power plants.

moved to Atlantic Station, a new community in mid-town Atlanta designed to put jobs, homes, and shopping all in one place, close to public transportation. It is an example of “smart growth” that cities are beginning to experiment with (pioneered in Portland, OR, but with visible seeds in most metropolitan areas, including Omaha). She has a one-mile commute, and she and her daughter live in a rented two bedroom loft apartment, with a utility bill that tops out around \$80. They can bus to work, school, grocery stores, etc. within 20 minutes or so. Sometimes they drive when it is raining or cold, but fills her auto with gas only once in two weeks. Some weekends she doesn’t use her car.² There were tradeoffs: She can’t afford to buy a house or a condo where she lives, and she had to have four garage sales to purge all the “things” they had accumulated in their former house. Their carbon footprint is about half of the national average for a family of two persons. But reducing her carbon footprint was not the mother’s intent when they moved; she “wanted her life back” (Shogren 2008b).

[12] Such changes obviously depend not only on convincing individuals and families to risk them, but also on government, community, and private sector policies that would produce desirable places to move. Moving closer to the urban center to a place like Atlantic Station described above is one thing, but moving to the urban center to a neighborhood of dilapidated housing, unsafe streets, poor schools, and few shops and urban amenities is quite another. My guess is that there are not enough quality “smart growth” projects that would entice many of us to move closer to older parts of our cities.

[13] People who can make such lifestyle changes do indeed and give up some things and options that are important, but in doing so they may gain some things that enhance the quality of life, such as less work to pay for the things and systems that make the high consumerist life possible, calmer and less complex lives with more discretionary time to do the things that most people say really matter, such as spending time with family and friends, pursuing avocations, engaging in community service and perhaps pursuing spiritual growth.

[14] Persuading people to make such changes depends on appropriate *framing* that puts such changes in contexts of powerful attitudes and values, such as the religious and moral contexts of the Misleh document. Beyond such appropriately framed moral persuasion, the Church should consider information and programs that provide concrete models for how people and families can achieve what they become convinced that they ought to do. How, for instance, can they satisfy their needs and aspirations with greater energy efficiency in energy consumption, ranging from the easy and relatively inexpensive (such as installing compact fluorescent light bulbs, more efficient appliances, and home insulation) to the more difficult and costly (such as moving closer to work and urban amenities)? Such change also requires *feedback* that informs people about the extent to which their efforts result in

² Such urban developments usually include within walking distance sidewalk cafes, coffee houses, pubs, bookstores, and small shops – the “third places” where people can congregate and find community. Such places are virtually absent from suburban housing tracts.

important consequences, if these are not obvious, such as that provided by utility companies about water and power usage throughout months of the year.

[15] I have noted and extended some of the many virtues of the Misleh document. As an honest respondent however, I need to mention what seems to me to be a major limitation. It is an important topic that is *not* discussed.

[16] First, a brief digression. For about the last 45 years scientists have attempted to understand the environmental impact of human life and activities. A now standard way of conceptualizing that is that the *environmental impact* of humans is determined by the size of a population as it interacts with the level of affluence in the living standards in connection with the efficiencies of existing technologies of production. This relationship is expressed compactly as $\text{Impact} = \text{population multiplied by affluence, multiplied by the efficiency of technology, or } I = PAT$. By extension, one can consider the “biospheric impact” of a single person as $\text{B.I. P.} = AT/P$. Thus a typical U.S. or Canadian person has many times the impact as does a typical Indian or Nigerian. But as the world’s third largest nation, one can not ignore the large and growing U.S. population. These are not only abstract formulas: Their elements can and have been measured empirically. Impact (I) can be represented by the amount of greenhouse gas emissions or the size of the human footprint, population (P) by the size and/or growth rate of the human population, affluence (A) by gross domestic product per capita, and technology (T) by kilowatt hours per capita of energy use. Contemporary research however, tends to treat T as a residual term that represents everything not captured in the coefficient of the relationship between P and A (Holdren and Ehrlich 6-7; Dietz and Rosa 1998; 237-39). This way of understanding the relationship between the natural environment and climate change has strong support in scientific literature. One study found the carbon emissions (in terms of millions of metric tons of CO₂ per year) of 111 nations strongly related to population size and affluence (gross domestic product per capita) (Dietz and Rosa 1994; Dietz and Rosa 1997). Other research using a sample of 208 nations was able to predict 77% of the variation in their “ecological footprints” by considering population size along with many other social and economic variables, such as position in the world-system of trade and economic exchanges, degrees of domestic inequality, urbanization, and literacy rates. Both high literacy rates and urbanization signify higher consumption and the “cultural ideology of consumerism/consumption” (Clapp; Jorgenson). Thus research finds that the size of the human ecological footprint is not a simple function of population size or gross domestic product (or some other measure of affluence) but of the joint impact of many things.

[17] Why do I spend so much time discussing this? Because it is the most obvious blind spot in the Misleh document, which elegantly discusses anthropogenic global warming in terms of affluence and technology, but with hardly a word about the impact of population. One does not have to be a doctrinaire Malthusian or a demographic determinist (I am neither) to recognize the powerful role of population growth and size as among the causes of global warming or other environmental problems. While fertility rates around the world have indeed fallen, the “population momentum” of such large populations (many in prime child-bearing years) means that by 2050 there could well be a human population of between 8 or 9 billion people, further straining the earth’s natural resources. The world’s most respected scientific bodies have maintained for over two decades now that the impact of such large

numbers are unsustainable, for which no discoveries or scientific advances would compensate.³

[18] Addressing population realistically requires, I think, the vigorous promotion of family planning and access to safe, effective, and affordable contraception by the world's people – in both the U.S. and developing world. However that may be, raising this concern about population is certainly an “inconvenient truth” (to steal a phrase from Al Gore) not adequately discussed in the Misleh document.

[19] I need to put these remarks in context. I have not taken leave of my senses, or forgotten where or to whom I speak, though I may have just stepped on the “third rail” of Roman Catholic moral theology and discourse. But, my sense of intellectual integrity requires me to raise the issue. Please be assured that these remarks have nothing to do with “Catholic bashing.” As a social scientist and Christian (United Methodist), I have worked compatibly and supportively in a Jesuit institution for the last 40 years, with considerable admiration for the Church and its social teachings and missions. In closing let me reaffirm the virtues of the Misleh report, and that I fully support, suggesting the importance of “concern about the future of the planet and its marvelous created order.”

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³ In an unprecedented 1992 joint statement the U.S. National Academy of Sciences and the Royal Society of London said that there are no technical “fixes” on the horizon to compensate for the global impacts of such population growth.

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