Thinking faith
THE ONLINE JOURNAL OF THE BRITISH JESUITS

Faiths in Creation I:

Judaic Models of Social Transformation

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In the first of a series, *Faiths in Creation*, Jonathan Gorsky argues that responsibility for our environment falls on us all, at both a personal and social level. How can the models of social transformation advocated in Jewish tradition help us to change our approach and become reliable stewards of the environment?

Over the last two decades environmental issues have moved from the political margins to centre stage. Green politics are no longer confined to minority parties: mainstream politicians as diverse as John McCain in the USA and Angela Merkel in Germany have put the environment high on their agendas and in the UK the main parties compete in acquiring green credentials, even if the gulf between rhetoric and reality – riding bicycles and building new airports – remains quite alarming.

The problems faced by politicians in achieving a significant response to what most scientists tell us is a looming global catastrophe are very daunting. The current state of democratic politics does not encourage politicians to campaign on manifestos that will be unpopular with voters, alienating significant interest groups in the financial community and industry as well as tens of thousands of people addicted to cheap flights and other consumerist habits. Road building and airport expansion continue to provide tangible evidence of the power of short-term market forces to derail environmental good intentions.

The impact of looming catastrophe on public opinion around the world means politicians have to take notice, however, so the situation is not as bleak as that which faced the ancient prophets in Biblical Israel, but there are nonetheless strong countervailing forces that environmentalists must contend with. We will have to achieve social, cultural and economic change on a scale beyond the scope and powers of conventional politics, so it is important that religious and cultural resources are fully mobilised.

Religious communities offer considerable wisdom on achieving social transformation and building societies that are not defined in consumerist terms. They can draw on their respective traditions to produce models that will promote social and cultural changes in the public realm.

In the case of Judaism, the Hebrew Bible records the many vicissitudes of an attempt to construct a new form of political community that was to be an inspiration and a blessing for all the world.[1] The concept of a model community that would serve as a light for the nations is one that might touch all of our faiths: it is not only a matter of persuading individuals among us to pay attention to their carbon footprints, rather it is imperative that our respective communities seek to nurture cultures in which people do not feel that they need to keep up with every high street fashion in order to be accepted by their friends and neighbours.

Consumerism is often inspired by a need for such acceptance in an environment where the bonds of community have become so attenuated that our superficial social connections demand rigorous material conformity as the sole guarantor of status

and acceptability. If we become poor or lose our employment then social life rapidly disintegrates: consumerist culture carries unspoken assumptions that are unexpectedly demanding and highly disciplinary. Parents' frantic endeavours to get their children into the right schools speak volumes about the social pressures that accompany relative prosperity. Pope John Paul II's vision of a civilisation of love that would transcend individualism can be seen as an ultimate response to current perils – a new form of deep environmentalism that is beyond the reach of purely political endeavour.

The Hebrew Bible yields two other prominent models of social transformation; one is dependent on law as the instrument of its efficacy and the second is the prophetic tradition which draws on the language of inspiration and creativity.

Law-making is rarely perceived as an instrument that promotes imaginative social change. For Christians down the ages, law has been identified with Pharisaic legislation, coloured by the Pauline critique that saw it as a source of transgression and intense personal frustration. The 'Old Law' served its purpose, until it was fulfilled by Christ and transformed by the vision of Christian love. Liberal societies accept that law is indispensable to social functioning, but their primary concern is to ensure that intrusion upon individual liberty is kept to a minimum. Law is a necessary evil, not a source of beneficence or social creativity.

The Hebrew Scriptures and later Jewish tradition took a different view, albeit that they too were alert to abuses and prospective pitfalls. Law is at the heart of the religious life: it is the instrument that will gradually enable us to overcome egotistic passion and restore the world to the Kingdom of God. Law is a gift of divine grace that guides us in our fragility and waywardness, while recognising that we are not bereft of hope and that we too can achieve holiness in our lives. It does not expect of us more than we can give and it reflects a divine presence that guides us as we stumble, rather than enunciating unremitting judgementalism.[2]

Environmental law in Hebrew scripture is minimalist and, taken at face value, seems very limited in its scope and requirements. For example the law (Deuteronomy 22:6–7) which enjoins us to chase away a mother bird before taking her young birds or her eggs would not satisfy modern environmental requirements and nor would a similar injunction (Leviticus 22:28) not to slaughter a cow and her calf on the same day. But the law can be seen in terms of the transforming of consciousness, rather than final status legislation. People who previously had no sensitivity to the well-being of birds and animals are asked to behave in a way that will gradually alter their perception and develop awareness of cruelty and suffering in the natural world. When this awareness has developed it in turn will affect their future conduct and they will be moved to go beyond the legal requirements. This is a nice example of law as not only restrictive, but also generative of change in individual conduct and sensitivity.

Likewise, intellectually, scholars analysed the law in terms of its intent and purpose and created abstract models that in turn inspired new practices. Medieval rabbis derived a principle from the two laws cited that would protect species of animals and birds from any act that tended towards their extinction and this is certainly relevant to the modern situation.

The transformative capacity of law is by no means unknown in British history. In the early days of the industrial revolution it was standard practice to work men, women and children for brutally long hours. The nineteenth-century Factory Acts not only put a stop to this, but they created new sensitivities which in turn gave rise to modern industrial relations. Arguably today's equality legislation is having a similar effect, not only protecting people at risk, but also gradually transforming social attitudes and behaviour.

The Factory Act example is relevant to our concerns in a second way. In the early nineteenth century small textile factories were unable to alleviate the situation of their work people without raising the cost of their product to a degree that would make it uncompetitive. Law created a level playing field which ensured that they would not be undercut by

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unscrupulous competitors. In contrast, in the United States at the moment, President Bush has left environmental issues to the business community rather than legislating, and as a result firms that wish to make changes are in difficulty as they are uncertain about the financial consequences for their business.

Finally, law is rooted in community practice: it offers a way of hearing groups whose interests are at odds with each other and promoting a *modus operandi* that will enable them to move forward in the interests of the whole community. It demands compromises, but also encourages the various interests to hear each other and, as far as is possible, is sensitive to their respective needs. Law is formulated by legislators, but they are obliged to be mindful of people whose vital interests may be difficult to reconcile. There is a small group of prominent dissenting scientists who do not accept current environmental consensus, and a community-based approach would seek to bring them together for discussion with their colleagues, rather than marginalising them or letting matters degenerate into personal animosity.

Law is the way of the rabbi and it has many advantages, but the process I described takes a very long time, sometimes many generations, and we do not have that time available to us.

There is a second way, and that is the way of the prophet. Like law, prophetic utterance is not seen today as inspiring or imaginative; it is understandably associated with doom-laden scenarios and unremitting rebuke born of desperate attempts to avert disaster.

Walter Brueggemann, in his small but important works on the pastoral significance of prophetic language, takes a different approach, which is best illustrated in modern terms by Martin Luther King's oratory, especially his much quoted 'I have a dream' address, delivered in Washington in August 1963.[3] King offered his audience an alternative vision in passionate and poetic language that let them see the world as he saw it, envisaging and touching a new possibility that would dissolve prejudice and discrimination without recourse to violence, guilt or hatred. Prophetic language in this mode speaks to our condition and articulates longing: as we listen, its vision becomes our own and we see it as real and possible. It is a language that speaks especially to those who are afflicted by social hurt and injustice: it is present with them and offers the comfort that can only be born of renewed hope. It gives them faith that their suffering will pass and assurance that, come what may, their world will never be defined by the forces arraigned against them that seem so powerful and so overwhelming; it is the language of Isaiah, of the exile, and it is the language that so touched the first followers of Jesus as they struggled with the brutalities of imperial Rome. It is a language that for many reasons is no longer available to our political leaders, and it does not come naturally to the scientists who have grasped our current situation with a clarity and passion that border on despair.

For Walter Brueggemann, 'the task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us' (p.13). He argues that a dominant culture can be so overpowering as to predetermine our view of the world and persuade us that there is no conceivable alternative. Drawing on a somewhat controversial account of the reign of the Biblical King Solomon, he talks of a 'royal consciousness' that numbs our responses and he maintains that the first task of prophetic ministry is to engage critically with the official ideology, enabling people to see through the 'economics of affluence' and the 'politics of oppression' that can even hold captive our understanding of God.

For Brueggemann, imagination is the crucial prophetic gift. Those who offer religious leadership must be able to enter into the experience of those whom they would address and speak to their condition with sensitivity and understanding. Such leaders must challenge and expose the assumptions of the dominant world view that will be taken for granted by their community. Above all, rather than evoking guilt and hopelessness, they must advocate an alternative vision of reality in such a way that those who hear them will be able to feel and touch its presence, finding for themselves a source of living

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faith and renewed inspiration.

Figures such as Martin Luther King draw on a poetic and passionate language that stands in striking contrast to the prosaic dullness of managerial politics. They understand that the great problems of our time will not be solved if we do not speak to the deepest needs of all concerned with encouragement, reassurance and clarity of purpose. Managerial politics is ill-equipped to provide renewed vision or help people come to terms with radical social change. A political vision in which people are driven by targets, league tables and the Darwinian forces of an unrestrained free market will not help anyone find the faith, hope and renewed sense of global community that we need if we are to address together the current situation.

One of the very few leading public figures who has grasped all this is the international economist Professor Jeffrey Sachs. Sachs is a secular figure who seems to have stumbled unaided upon Brueggemann's model of prophetic leadership. He is aware of popular cynicism about public affairs and understands that many in his audiences will believe that there is little they can do to avert impending environmental disaster as global politics are governed by forces that are beyond the reach of ordinary people.

Sachs focuses on the gravity of the situation but he does not give way to unremitting gloom and tends to move quite swiftly to outlining feasible and constructive approaches. He reminds his listeners of seemingly insuperable problems – measles and polio in Africa, chronic hunger in India and China – where much progress has been made. He communicates in plain and accessible language, preferring a homespun example to a battery of statistics.

Sachs reminds his audiences that 'great social transformations – the end of slavery, the women's and civil rights movements, the end of colonial rule, the birth of environmentalism – began with public awareness and engagement. Our political leaders followed rather than led. It was scientists, engineers, church-goers and young people who truly led the way. If as citizens we vote for war then war it will be. If instead we support a global commitment to sustainable development then our leaders will follow and we will find a way to peace'.

Sachs concluded one of his recent Reith Lectures with a final attempt to overcome his listeners' alienation from the public realm. He assured them that there is 'a role for everybody and every community, and a need for everybody to become engaged. You must be the peacemakers, development specialists, ecologists, all. Do not lose heart...' He left them with a quotation from Robert Kennedy about the numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that shape human history.

Every Friday night Jews celebrate the commencement of the Sabbath, when synagogue liturgy and prayers recited at the table recall the holiness of creation as it was in the beginning. At that time I sometimes also remember the words of astronauts who had the privilege of seeing the earth in a way that was unprecedented and whose language helps us move beyond the dominance of nature which has been our aspiration since the origins of modern science. Like Martin Luther King in the domain of social relations, they too are prophetic, for their language, like his words, helps us to see the world in a new way, enabling us to restore our reverence and our sensitivity. Sigmund Jahn, from Germany, said that before he flew he was already aware of how small and vulnerable our planet is, 'but only when I saw it from space, in all its ineffable beauty and fragility, did I realise that our most urgent task is to cherish and preserve it....' Taylor Wang, a Chinese American, recalled a Chinese tale of some men sent to harm a young girl, who, upon seeing her beauty, became her protectors rather than her violators: 'That's how I felt seeing the Earth for the first time – I could not help but love and cherish her'. The personification is reminiscent of prophetic utterances about Jerusalem, which see the city as a woman alone and bereft, so evoking a human sympathy not usually granted to cities of stone and mortar. As James Irwin put it 'seeing this has to change a man, has to make him appreciate the creation of God and the love of God', and Edgar Mitchell said simply that his view of our planet was

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a glimpse of divinity.[4]

In conclusion, I have argued that religious responses to environmental catastrophe should not be confined to encouraging individuals among us to minimise their carbon footprints, however important this might be. We have to engage with consumerism seriously and recognise the psychological and spiritual pathos sometimes unspoken in our shopping centres, offering the religious community as an alternative and a source of healing. From Judaism I have drawn upon two models of personal and social transformation; the rabbinic and the prophetic. Law emerges as a significant public instrument of progress, as well as a source of personal development and communal mediation, rooted in analysis and a grasp of technical and scientific practicality. Prophecy offers the way of inspiration and creativity, as opposed to guilt and anxiety. Its key instrument is poetic language that shares a renewed vision of the universe as *milieu divin*.

Both models are necessary: prophecy without law has no means of addressing the detailed complexity of practical application: law depends on prophetic imagination if it is to be truly an instrument of transforming community and society, particularly in the short time that is available to us.

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[1] For the development of Biblical community see Hanson, P.D., *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible* (Westminster, John Knox, 2001) The light for the nations is e.g. Isaiah 49:6 and the blessing for the world is Genesis 12:.3.

[2] For further discussion of law see Brague, R. The Law of God, The Philosophical History of an Idea (Chicago, 2007).

[3] For the approach to prophecy taken here see Brueggemann, W. The Prophetic Imagination (Fortress Press, 1978), The Hopeful Imagination, Prophetic Voices Exile (Fortress Press, 1986) and Miller, P.D. (ed) Walter Brueggemann: A Social Reading of the Old Testament: Prophetic Approaches to Israel's Communal Life (Fortress Press, 1994).

[4] The astronauts are cited at www.solarviews.com/eng/earthop.htm

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