

## The Ecological Consumer (A Christian perspective)

The Christian view of greed is that it is harmful to the environment and communities. In the bible the Prophets and leaders of the early Christians saw greedy behaviour as harmful as it was driven by desire which led people to sin. Jesus also sought to highlight how desire for a large accumulation of wealth does not always bring pleasure and death can occur before you had a chance to enjoy the wealth. (See Luke 12.13-21) Scholars like Thomas Aquinas also identified greed with being harmful to a person's neighbour. Greed is a vice which causes harm to communities and the natural environment.

Individual Christians also face the challenge, in being ready to make sacrifices and consume in moderation for the sake of eco-justice. I would suggest that it will be hard for the twenty-first century consumer to apply temperateness in consumption and make greater use of renewable resources. The Church faces a challenge in how it puts its expressions of concern for the environment into practical action to prevent the greedy element within the human race from destroying the natural environment, and ultimately themselves. Christians may be able to provide alternative approaches to consumption without greed; however, putting that into practice will be a huge challenge.

On the other hand not all people see greed as harmful; in fact they see it as economically advantageous. We are all consumers in one way or another, therefore consumerism in itself is not all bad, it is only the greedy consumer and those who use material from non-sustainable resources that harm the environment. Therefore it has to be acknowledged that not all people see greed as harmful, taking an opposite approach to the natural environment to that of the Environmentalists who believe that greedy behaviour is ethically unacceptable. The greedy appear to be happy to take what they want, grabbing what they want while stocks last. It ought to be a matter of concern for all that once natural resources have been destroyed they cannot be replaced and in the end no one will gain from their destruction. Environmentalists of all persuasions face the challenge of how to educate people that greed and overconsumption are harmful to the natural environment.

In my opinion greed and overconsumption are harmful to the natural environment. I believe my Christian Environmentalist view is supported biblically and by Christian scholars through the centuries, environmental groups and other organisation who care about the world we live in, however all face the challenge of how to educate people that being greedy is wrong and causes damage to the

community and the environment. Christians can play an important part in bringing about a change in attitude from one that exploits nature to one that works for a sustainable use of natural resources and a willingness to engage in the caring stewardship of God's creation.

### *How could Christians respond?*

Christians may be aware of the problems created by greed, but how can they respond? Christian organisations have frequently called for justice for the poor, but justice on its own will not solve the problems of the poor or prevent the threats to the natural environment, justice can only come about when people start to apply other ethical virtues. This is a subject that is too vast to be discussed here;

The negative behaviour of the greedy could be countered by emphasis on the Christian virtues of Justice, Prudence (wisdom), Temperance, Fortitude (courage), Faith, Love and Peace. In particular prudence, temperance and fortitude could provide a basis in assisting the development of alternative approaches to how people live their lives.

Prudence is often associated with the use of money, but it has a far wider meaning. It means wisdom, good judgement, caution and carefulness. If greed could be reduced and there was a prudent use of our natural resources it may then be possible to bring an end to the present environmental damage. The problem will require politicians to show wisdom in how they deal with the problem, but good judgement is not always shown if the actions needed appear unpopular. People will have to be cautious in what they buy if they are to take care of the environment.

Temperance is often referred to when Christians address the issues of alcoholism. In the early part of the twentieth century the temperance movement campaigned for an end of alcohol abuse, although many signed the pledge they soon drifted back into their old ways. In the context of life style it means self-restraint, abstemiousness, and self-denial a feature rarely seen in the western consumer society. Temperance in the modern world means acting to bring an end to self-indulgence and the 'must buy' consumerism of modern society, which is having a negative impact on the environment. (Easier said than done.)

Fortitude is defined as courage, strength of mind and moral strength. Christian ethical virtues clearly show it is morally right to care for and protect the environment, but do Christians have the courage to speak out against the continuing damage caused by greed. The real test of moral strength will be seen

when Christian leaders take action to protect God's creation from human kind, but I cannot see this happening.

### *The ethical issues that ought to be considered*

The ethical issues which have been raised above present a challenge to the Christian approach to life. Not all people are Christian and there are a variety of ethical approaches which make it difficult to link greed to environmental damage. People campaign for Human Rights; perhaps we are approaching a time when there should be a rights act for the environment?

People in the United Kingdom live in a pluralist society, which creates problems because of the different ethic approaches; these are not purely restricted to religious groups. Christians may want to take an absolutist position, but while Christians cannot agree on their own doctrine, they are not in a position to criticise others. There is also the contrasting view of relativism, which could take the opposite view to those who think greed is wrong. A person's moral perspective is relevant to their position in life, for the rich person it may be morally right to spend their money on expensive consumer goods because it creates employment for other people. The problem is not spending as such, but excessive and greedy spending on items that cause harm.

In biblical times greed was clearly seen as a sin manifesting itself in covetousness, selfishness and gluttony. In the twenty-first century greed materialises in many different ways resulting in the Earth's limited natural resources rapidly being consumed. If the human race is not going to destroy the natural world, which Christians and other faiths believe was created by God, there will have to be a change in lifestyle for the modern consumer, moving, from one based on greed, to one based on sustainability. Christianity could help with this by encouraging change in consumption buying practices. The following are some suggestions on how this could be achieved.

### *Possible action*

People can feel helpless when they are aware of problems, but those aware of the problems threatening the environment can make a contribution to tackling the problems. Firstly, Christians could take action individually and collectively to support groups that are working to address these issues. They could write letters of protest to politicians, companies and the media. Support organisations that are working for changes that include: reduction in the transportation of consumer goods which cause pollution through the use of road, air and sea freight, help for the most vulnerable poor people affected by environmental damage. People can also reflect on their own behaviour.

Christians need to be seen acting together on the issue and providing leadership by example, something they have not always been good at. Another area where there needs to be further reflection is in the Church's own teachings which appear at times contradictory. One example is that the Christian Church advocates caring for God's creation, but cannot agree on how to control population growth which is possibly a greater threat to the Planet than greed.

*Other issues that need consideration*

Consumerism is not the only form of greed that affects the environment. Consumerism was chosen as it affects all people because they are consumers and their actions could help protect the natural environment. Other areas that need to be researched include; commerce, trading practices, finance, debt and poverty.

Christian teaching contains many references to caring for God's creation, but frequently lack liturgies and teaching that can help people relate this to their own lives. The church could develop liturgies based on protection of the natural environment, highlighting the impact of greed and other issues affecting the environment. To aid with this objective there needs to be further investigation leading to the publishing of a practical guide and liturgies to help people change their lifestyle and bring about a new consumerism that protects the natural environment not destroys it.

The church ought to review its pastoral practices, to encourage care for the natural environment; develop pastoral support for those who wish to change their lifestyle, but find the economic pressures difficult to overcome. The pastoral work could help to encourage prudence among its congregations and take a higher profile position in the work to change the greedy attitudes that have an adverse impact on the environment.

The biggest challenges will be to educate greedy consumers on the need to change their lifestyles. This can only be truly addressed if all concerned are willing to act together to protect the environment and find ways of challenging the attitudes that cause damage to the environment, because although the various aid groups have repeatedly highlighted the issues nothing has really changed. The Christian church is ideally placed to coordinate action, but at present appears unwilling to do this.

There is also the need to develop a greater understanding of the ethical issues affecting the environment. A study that considers the ethical issues involved could be carried out with a view to developing environmental assessments that could monitor consumption and business practices, and help develop ethical practices that do not harm the natural environment.

*Final observation*

If there is no change to the present consumption patterns the human race could bring about its own destruction. This was illustrated by an article in the Independent newspaper in 2008. The article highlighted how vulnerable life on Earth is to the effects of global warming. It draws attention to the melting of the sub sea layer of permafrost in Siberia, which has, since the last Ice Age, prevented millions of tons of methane escaping into the atmosphere. Methane is 20 times more powerful as a greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide which is the focus of most of the global warming debate. If this methane is released into the atmosphere it could well bring an end to life as we know it. (The Independent 23/09/2008) The problem is that when people are driven by greed, it is very difficult to change their patterns of behaviour, even when greedy consumerism contributes to environmental degradation. This is why reducing the harmful impact the greedy consumer has on the natural environment could possibly be one of the greatest challenges for the human race in the twenty-first century.

End

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