

# Climate change as a multi-layered crisis for humanity <sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Climate change unmistakably presents such a crisis. However, it is not immediately clear in what sense it poses such a crisis. This contribution unpacks some of the many layers of this crisis that requires a multi-disciplinary approach. The direction of the analysis is to support and clarify the observation in ecumenical discourse on climate change that it presents a cultural, a moral and indeed a spiritual crisis. The analysis is interspersed with quotations from a document produced by a Climate change committee of the South African Council of Churches entitled *Climate Change – A Challenges to the churches in South Africa* (2009).

## Introduction

In his book *The Great work* Thomas Berry describes the transformation of industrialised societies in order to become more sustainable as a pertinent example of a “great work” – a collective and multi-disciplinary task in which people from all walks of life need to participate over several generations in order to accomplish an encompassing vision.<sup>2</sup> This is an apt description of what it would take to address climate change. What is needed is nothing less than the transformation of the energy basis of the current global economy from fossil fuels towards more sustainable alternatives.

This is not an open ended process though. From the first international treaty at Kyoto (1997) this has to be accomplished within let us say five decades, of which the first was the most critical. To add such an ominous time frame to this “great work” is to allude to a sense of crisis – which did not apply to the medieval examples that Thomas Berry refer to. The word “crisis” is one that I prefer to use hesitantly. All too often such a crisis evokes apocalyptic images that induce a paralysing fear. This is far removed from the encompassing vision that provided the moral energy in examples of social transformation such as the renaissance, the enlightenment, the industrial revolution and the struggle for democracy in South Africa.

Yet, if the word “crisis” implies a turning-point, a time of danger or suspense, a time for appropriate decisions (from the Greek *krino* = to decide), then climate change unmistakably presents such a crisis. However, it is not immediately clear in what sense it poses such a crisis. In this contribution I will unpack some of the many layers of this crisis. In the process I will acknowledge why climate change requires a multi-disciplinary approach. The direction of the analysis will be to support the observation in ecumenical discourse on climate change that it presents a cultural, a moral and indeed a spiritual crisis. If so, why exactly is this the case? In what sense is it a crisis? I will intersperse my observations with quotations from a document produced by a Climate change committee of the South African Council of Churches entitled *Climate Change – A Challenges to the churches in South Africa* (2009).

## 1. Human hardship?

At the surface and most obvious level climate change poses a crisis in terms of human hardship and suffering, of making ends meet in a hostile environment. This typically has to do with either too much water or too little war. Climate change is already affecting the lives of millions of people in this sense. This applies most obviously to island states which are threatened by flooding or by the salination of soils. One may also consider seasonal flooding in other parts of

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<sup>2</sup> See Berry 1999.

the world although it is not always clear whether this results from over-population, deforestation or changing weather patterns. In Africa suffering of this kind usually results from changing rainfall patterns and thus to fresh water supplies. This is expressed in the SACC's document on climate change:

Many of us are or will probably become the victims of climate change. In South Africa this will be related to environmental refugees from elsewhere in Africa, increased competition for jobs, changing weather patterns in particular parts of the country, a lack of drinking water resulting from that, diminishing crop yields, diseases such as malaria becoming more widespread, rising food prices and transport costs. While the affluent may have the resources to overcome challenges in terms of food, health, housing, transport and security, the poor amongst us will be unable to attend to even our most basic needs. Those of us who are vulnerable therefore intuitively fear what climate change will bring. We know that we will be hit the hardest.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Social services?

At another level the social impact of such hardships becomes evident in terms of delivering humanitarian aid but also with the subsequent migration of people and especially with environmental refugees. This obviously puts pressure on social systems elsewhere in the world in terms of housing, food, social services, employment and so forth. In climate change jargon this is the problem of "adaptation". The difficulties around adaptation are well-known. A comment from the SACC document may suffice:

Such assistance and emergency measures are often thwarted when powerful institutions face an economic, financial or military/security crisis. Then the tendency is to attend to one's own interests first. Thus, at a time of financial crisis as experienced in 2008, politicians tend to be more worried about the standard of living of their voters than about the global poor Likewise, when security threats emerge – as will be increasingly likely due to conflict over scarce resources – these tend to override any concerns over sustainability. In such a context, when love tends to "grow cold", churches can and have played a crucial role in assisting the victims, including those of climate change.<sup>4</sup>

## 3. Biological sustainability?

At another level, which requires a longer term perspective, climate change will according to scientific reports present a crisis in terms of biodiversity within particular ecosystems, the extinction of species not able to adapt timeously and eventually the disintegration of some ecosystems. For humans this poses the problem of the sustainable use of renewable biological resources. Discourse on "sustainability" has become widespread and subsequently rather confused and sometimes contradictory (for example with references to debates on "sustainable growth" and "sustainable development").<sup>5</sup> One may argue that the problem is not merely *whether* something can be sustained or *how* it can be sustained, but *what* it is that has to be sustained. To put it crudely: Is the question how long the lifestyles of the consumer class may be sustained? Or mega-sports? Or institutions like universities? Or global tourism? Or industrialised civilisation? Or neo-liberal capitalism? As many have recognised, what is at stake is the very foundations of our notion(s) of civilisation. The SACC document puts its finger where it hurts:

These aspects can be sustained, but only at grave costs and only when sacrifices are made elsewhere in order to make that possible. Some may need to travel more, but that is only sustainable if others travel less (if using fossil fuels). Some may want to have a carbon footprint above 2 tons per year, but then the footprint of others have to be less than that. *The real problem is that decisions over what should be sustained are not made by those who have to make the sacrifices.*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See SACC 2009:10.

<sup>4</sup> See SACC 2009:25-26.

<sup>5</sup> See the discussion on these terms in Conradie 2011:19-28.

<sup>6</sup> See SACC 2009:55.

#### 4. Human survival?

Climate changes may also present a crisis in terms of human survival. Survival is another word which I use hesitantly since the poor and the wealthy in South Africa alike adopt the language of survival to legitimise their particular interests.<sup>7</sup> However, the worst-case scenarios around climate change quite literally present this as a crisis of human survival. James Lovelock's *The vanishing face of Gaia* is an example. He believes that an average temperature rise of more than 5 degrees Celsius is by now virtually inevitable, that adaptation therefore has to be prioritised and that only 100 million human beings may survive the catastrophe by the end of this century if the carrying capacity of the land surface falls to 10% of what we have now.<sup>8</sup> If this is even remotely true, the survival of human culture, languages, institutions, scientific ventures and technological progress would most certainly be at stake as well. As a result, as the SACC's document on climate change notes, "climate change evokes some silent but pervasive fears for the future" It adds, "Most of us wonder what kind of world our children and grandchildren will inherit from us. While some may be excited about technological progress, climate change has placed a damper on any easy sense of optimism. We fear living on a hotter, drier, heavily polluted planet, under a more dangerous sun, with more people to feed, more refugees, more conflict over ever-scarcer resources and much beauty irrevocably lost."<sup>9</sup>

#### 5. Scientific reliability?

Such scenarios present a crisis of a different kind, namely around the credibility of scientific reports. I am referring here not merely to tampering with scientific data and certainly not to the possibility that the climate change sceptics may after all be right given the wide-ranging nature of such scenarios. What is at stake is the now global trust in the salvific potential of science to resolve all our most serious problems. Such trust has been earned by four centuries of meticulous scholarship. Yet, predicting changes in the global climate is so enormously complex that anything approximating scientific certainty has proved to be elusive. The IPCC has found an admirable way of coping with such uncertainty through consensus reporting. Yet the question remains: can science, technology and education save us if that forms very much part of the roots of the crisis. What is nevertheless quite remarkable about the role of science in current discourse on climate change is that prophetic warnings in this regard do not come from churches or religious people but from scientists who have assumed the role of prophets probably against their own methodological inclinations.

#### 6. Technological innovation?

One may argue, in response, that this is a pseudo-crisis. We know quite enough about the gravity of the looming crisis by now to be able to act upon it. Scientific uncertainties cannot provide excuses for inaction. Perhaps the crisis is around suitable technologies to address the problem? Surely, science can help us here? It should be obvious that technological solutions will be required. However, two problems remain: some of the highly innovative solutions are far too risky and the suspicion remains that technology is not ethically neutral (it has exacerbated the impact of the industrial revolution, it can enhance human destructiveness<sup>10</sup> and funding around technology remains in the hands of the already powerful). Moreover, the simple truth, according

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<sup>7</sup> The SACC document states: "At the same time such 'survival' language can easily be abused. Even those of us in the consumer class often slip into a 'survival' mode. We do that by trying to protect what we have at all costs – amidst the real threats to life, property and employment security. We also struggle to cope with the demands of life and the tempo and competition of an industrialised urban society and often just try to 'get through each day'" (2009:57).

<sup>8</sup> See Lovelock 2009:87.

<sup>9</sup> See SACC 2009:9.

<sup>10</sup> The SACC document states: "This problem cannot be resolved only on the basis of advanced forms of technology. The hope for quick technological fixes, that will leave consumerist ways of living untouched, has to be unmasked as false" (p. 6).

to numerous reports, is that the technology is already available to address the problem. Why, then, does the crisis seem so intractable? Why do we fail to use the available technology? Is that because these technologies are too expensive or not cost-effective?

## **7. & 8. Financial or Economic instability?**

Two other layers of the crisis may indeed be of a financial or economic nature. The word “crisis” should be used sparingly here too as this evokes the connotation of the “financial crisis” (of 2008). Of course, this crisis may offer another easy excuse for inaction. The problem is clearly not merely financial. As the Stern report indicates, the costs of transforming the energy basis of the global economy are not exorbitantly high. The costs of inaction will eventually far outweigh the costs of funding the required transformation. Indeed, a greener economy may provide lucrative opportunities for business to some. Is the real problem then of an economic nature? This may be closer to the truth. For economists the underlying question is how the stability of the market may be maintained before questions of economic growth or sustainability can be addressed.<sup>11</sup> The cynical response from ecumenical activists may be that this emphasis on the market merely assumes that the ecologically destructive system of industrialised capitalism has to be brought back on track.<sup>12</sup> At least one may say that economic hesitation to urgently introduce the drastic measures required are related to anxieties about the instability which that may cause to markets in already troubled economic waters.

## **9. Political leadership?**

Politicians, understandably, have a primary interest in the state of their national economies. Given the functioning of the global market they seek a competitive advantage for trade in relation to other role players. Of course, this requires mutually beneficial business partnerships so that self-interest cannot be the only determining factor. A failing economy in one part of the world will have an adverse effect on other national economies. Nevertheless, the difficulties of finding a political solution to climate change through a binding treaty are blatantly evident from the most recent Conferences of the Parties and the diminishing expectation for COP17 to be held in Durban in 2011. One may be inclined to blame this on a lack of political leadership and courage. However, the truth is that politicians are caught between expectations from the general public to come to a ground-breaking agreement and by the interests of economic power blocks involved in international negotiations on any issue. Either way, every failure of the next Conference of the Parties implies that it becomes more difficult to reverse the concentration of greenhouse gases in future while faith in the possibility of a political solution also diminishes. This poses yet another layer of the crisis: the role and the credibility of the United Nations in addressing any such a global issue. The big ship of the global economy cannot change its direction (its energy basis) overnight. It would take considerable time, even though the captain’s decision can indeed be made at a single Conference of the Parties. If the political decision comes

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<sup>11</sup> This emphasis on the Market is often critiqued in ecumenical literature. The SACC document states: “Several surrogates for trust in God have emerged: political power, quality education, access to swift technology, the power of positive thinking, marketing and, perhaps above all, the Market. The Market has assumed several divine characteristics. It is supposed to be benevolent, invisible and omnipresent, even omnipotent in order to produce wealth and distribute benefits, costs and obligations to all. We are called to trust that the Market will indeed deliver, even where these results are not yet obvious. even poses a consumerist version of the theodicy problem: Why does an omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient (if invisible) Market fail to deliver well-being to everyone, if it is in principle benevolent? Why do bad things happen to poor people if the Market should ensure that resources are distributed more or less equitably?” (see p. 44-45).

<sup>12</sup> The SACC document explains: “The argument is typically that neo-liberal capitalism will almost inevitably collapse because the production of wealth is not sustainable and because of the tensions associated with economic inequalities. This system cannot easily overcome economic inequalities because of the financial incentives to shed jobs. Economic growth can only lead to job creation if the pace of growth is faster than that of job creation. The recent worldwide financial crisis is thus regarded as a symptom of a deeper systemic problem that cannot be cured with governmental interventions to get economic growth back on track. The problem lies with the growth paradigm itself” (p. 31).

to late the Titanic may not be able to steer away from the iceberg. The iceberg cannot move.

## 10. The role of the media and marketing?

The failure of political leadership may perhaps be explained with reference to the rather meek excuse of political parties that they cannot alienate voters too much for example by proposing drastic carbon taxes. Political survival can only come through winning the next election. One may well say: Ecological suicide in 50 years from now will always seem preferably compared to political suicide five years from now. In democratic countries, political solutions remain dependent upon the will of the majority. But what if that proves to be ecologically self-destructive? Every family in China may wish to own and use private motorised transport (on par with North America) but that would be catastrophic for traffic congestion, air pollution and climate change. In such a case more than political leadership is required. The media and marketing undoubtedly have to play crucial roles in the education and conscientisation of the electoral public. At least one would need to swing the views of 10% of opinion makers in the population who are influential enough to change the minds, attitudes and behaviour of others. However, the truth is that the media cannot help but to send us mixed messages. The prime time allocated to discuss greenhouse emissions scarcely has the same impact than the time allocated to advertise the lures of motorised transport. Since the media are dependent on such income they are trapped in a situation where they reflect rather than challenge the dynamics of society.

## 11. Social transformation?

The analysis of these ten layers of the crisis points in the direction of the need to understand processes of social transformation. Here one has to address the limits to rapid social change.<sup>13</sup> Societies can and have to change almost immediately in times of disaster through fire, flood, earthquakes or epidemics. However, if the full extent of such a disaster will only be evident let us say in 50 years from now, it is far more difficult to persuade whole societies to urgently introduce the required measures now. Case studies on communities living around volcanoes predicted to erupt quite soon would illustrate that. What is at stake here is evidently resistance to change, but such resistance can come from protecting vested interests, from lethargy or from an inability to see viable alternatives. Here one may draw on various contributions from the social and behavioural sciences to understand why societies would change and why not. I recall of few examples:

- Historians like Jared Diamond have pointed out that societies have in the past responded in different ways to an impending crisis, and that this may indeed trigger financial instability, the disintegration of economic systems, an inability to provide military security and eventually the collapse of entire civilisations.<sup>14</sup>
- Malcolm Gladwell's bestseller *The tipping point: How little things can make a big difference* (2000) indicates three key factors that each play in role in determining whether a particular trend will "tip" into an influential movement. He labels these the "Law of the Few", the "Stickiness Factor", and the "Power of Context". However, given the focus on already existing trends it is far less clear that such a tipping point can be socially engineered, let alone if the steps required may prove to be unpopular.
- The work of NOVA in South Africa on the use of coal stoves by the urban poor indicates that a 100% success rate is possible through demonstrations of the Basa Magogo technique of packing coal that would save 30% coal, if only people would see the attractive alternative.<sup>15</sup>
- An interesting case study by Hijme Stoffels<sup>16</sup> on the willingness of people to change their views on

<sup>13</sup> In an early article Larry Rasmussen (1975) already argued that there are three limits to growth, namely economic limits, biospheric limits (exemplified by the limited capacity of the climate to absorb greenhouse emissions) and social limits: the degree of social change that is possible in a relatively short period.

<sup>14</sup> See Diamond 2005.

<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.nova.org.za/projects/basa-magogo.php>, retrieved on 7 September 2011.

<sup>16</sup> I am relying here on memory from a most interesting conversation in December 1987. I could not find bibliographic details for this study.

nuclear arms suggests that a person has to weigh the reasons why she or he should change against the reasons why change may not (yet) be appropriate. If only the reasons why change is necessary are highlighted, the person will psychologically be inclined to stress the arguments to the contrary. A better rhetorical strategy may therefore be to recognise the reasons why change may not be appropriate so that the same person would come to acknowledge the reasons why change may well be necessary. In Afrikaans we call this “boere-sielkunde” and from personal experience I can attest that it works extremely well. Of course, classic studies in the rhetoric offer a more complex account of the difficulties encountered in the art of persuasion.

- Yet, in cases where some form of revolution is required such rhetorical strategies would not suffice. Then a latter-day Marcuse would wish to identify the possible carriers of the revolution. Given the commercialisation of higher education students may not be our best hope, while artists may indeed be the “antennae of society” (Ezra Pound) but can only be effective through media coverage.
- Stefan Skrimshire observes that there has been a proliferation of rhetoric in the public media on “tipping points”. What impact does such rhetoric have on environmental ethics and grassroots political culture? Tipping points represent the prediction of the unpredictable but also of the ethically unthinkable. Such uncertainties pose the problem of risk management. Skrimshire argues that such rhetoric may lead to two erroneous conclusions, namely that nothing will happen until we reach such a tipping point and that once we reach that point, nothing can be done about it. This poses questions around risk-willingness, risk avoidance and risk acceptance – in the context of endemic uncertainty. The underlying question at an individual and the collective level is what difference (if any) our actions could make given the unpredictability of climate change. He recognises that an ethics of risk is required rather than blind faith or shrewd calculation in order to commit oneself to an uncertain goal.<sup>17</sup>

Sceptics may want to say that it is virtually impossible to introduce the kind of changes required timeously. Collectively, people will only recognise the need for such transformation when it is already too late. This may well be the case but it would be simply irresponsible to wait for that to happen.

If so, it is clearly imperative to gain a better understanding of why people are willing to change and to accept responsibility for that. Such an understanding would be necessary for the kind of social engineering that will be required to shift the energy basis of the global economy from fossil fuels to sustainable alternatives. My sense is that social scientists are only beginning to contribute to global discourse on climate change.

I suspect, though, that such behavioural studies will not yield promising results either. The underlying crisis (if you wish to call it that) is that all our most trusted theories on social change seem to prove helpless for the kind of change that is necessary here. Why is this the case?

- The underlying problem is clearly not just a lack of information or planning. Knowing what is right does not always translate into doing what is right. We do respond to available information and education but that is necessarily a slow process. Moreover, we also have to take into account that those with the highest carbon footprint are typically also amongst the better educated. Even those of us who are well acquainted with scenarios around climate change find it difficult to curb our carbon footprint to anything approximating sustainable levels (let us say to 2 tons of CO<sub>2e</sub> per person per year). Changes are possible but only when attractive alternatives become available.
- If education fails, marketing provides another trusted strategy for social change. Information on a cheaper or better product or the demonstration of alternatives can prove to be very effective as long as we can recognise the positive outcomes for our lives. However, marketing works much better if the product on offer does not require from one to scale down.
- If marketing fails, effective management and innovative leadership may help to steer an organisation or society through a crisis. However, our theories of management have scarcely prepared us to address a problem that is global in scope, that will become truly ominous only in a few decades and that will indeed require a collective, coordinated effort from at least all industrialised and industrialising countries.
- If management fails, punishment offers another, no longer widely promoted option. People are typically willing to change if they recognise that not doing so will have negative implications for them. This

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<sup>17</sup> See Skrimshire 2011.

strategy may yield some results, for example through “the polluter pays” principle and through carbon taxes. However, there are scarcely analogies in history where the powerful throughout an empire will collectively accept punishing taxes introduced by themselves in order to effect the required change. Even then the question is whether such taxes will yield the required 80% reduction in greenhouse emissions in industrialised countries. The unpalatable truth is that greenhouse emission haven been rising steadily since 1990, also in industrialised societies. The question remains whether our proposed policies are in line with the gravity and the global scale of the problem<sup>18</sup>

- If punishment fails, one can still call on a sense of responsibility. People are indeed willing to accept responsibilities on the basis of a sense of identity and their role responsibilities in a particular context. Most of us are more than willing to do our duties, to pay our TV licenses simply because it is the right thing to do – as a SABC advertisement has it. What is required here, though, is (rapid) social change, not an affirmation of cultural identity. Such a sense of responsibility is fostered through moral formation – which is widely recognised in virtue theory, theories of personal and social development and theories of moral education. However, the emphasis here is on socialisation and internalisation. This would prepare people to handle social change psychologically, but are hardly aimed at social transformation.<sup>19</sup>
- If calling on a sense of responsibility fails, prophetic warnings and threats may be considered. This is the most trusted strategy in the media. Apocalyptic images abound in scientific reports, science fiction movies, cartoons and heavy metal rock music alike. We human beings seem to derive pleasure from such images. We are thrilled by thrillers. However, people seldom respond to prophetic threats in an appropriate manner. Apocalyptic images prompt anxieties and fear more often paralyse than not. It seldom promotes responsible decision making.
- A final strategy to introduce social change is to speak to peoples’ desires, their dreams and aspirations for the future. People are willing to endure hardships (like studying towards a degree) if the reward is attractive enough. We are quite willing to save in order to purchase something desirable. Such dreams for the future may be based on a vision for the good society. In South Africa many were willing to fight for justice even where this may not have been in their own immediate interests. However, there is a deeper problem here, namely that people’s dreams and aspirations are being shaped more decisively by a culture of consumerism than by the belief that “a different world is possible” (see below).

## 12. A cultural crisis?

This last comment points in the direction of a deeper, cultural crisis that climate change is presenting. Several religious leaders have suggested that the underlying problem around climate is less a problem of know-what or know-how than of know-why and know-wherefore.<sup>20</sup> The crisis that we have to face is not primarily an ecological crisis but a deeper, cultural crisis in nature and wholly of nature running fully against it.<sup>21</sup> The environmental crisis is a pathological sign of cultural failure and bankruptcy. It indicates that the values underlying the dominant cultural and economic practices in the world today have become bankrupt. The Orthodox theologian Timothy Ware observes that, “Yet, in fact the crisis is not first and foremost an ecological crisis. The fundamental difficulty lies not outside but inside ourselves, not in the ecosystem but in the human heart. The present-day crisis, that is to say, is primarily a crisis not concerning the environment, but concerning the way in which we ourselves think.”<sup>22</sup>

The dominant global culture is evidently shaped by consumerism. Although there are signs of resistance against consumerism amongst the very affluent and those close to retirement, there can be little doubt that the dreams and aspirations of the lower middle classes are being shaped by the demonstration of affluence. The SACC document recognises this clearly:

In the context of consumerism we have to be aware of the ways in which our rampant desires have

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<sup>18</sup> The Global Carbon project, a study by 31 leading scientists headed by Prof Corinne Le Quéré, reported in December 2009 that annual carbon emissions have increased by 29% from 2000 to 2008 and by 41% from 1990 to 2008. Except for 2009 (due to the global recession, this represents an annual increase of 3%).

<sup>19</sup> For one overview of theories of moral formation, see the study by Van der Ven 1998.

<sup>20</sup> See Rasmussen 1996:74.

<sup>21</sup> See Rasmussen 1996:7.

<sup>22</sup> Ware 1997:26.

fuelled the economy and have spiralled beyond control. Although the consumer class have led the way in this regard, sadly, we who belong to the lower middle class also desire that which we do not have. When it comes to a love of money, it may well be true that those who have it the least, love it the most.<sup>23</sup>

Ironically, such a spirit of consumerism is promoted by economic inequalities – both in terms of the conspicuous consumption of the affluent and the aspirations of the poor. Preaching the prosperity gospel offers a religious legitimisation of such an upward social mobility. This is undoubtedly the fastest growing form of religion on the African continent.

It is not difficult to offer a critique of consumerism.<sup>24</sup> It is far more difficult to consider viable and attractive alternatives. The Global Social Forum may declare that belief that “a different world is possible” and some may practice viable alternatives, but this remains very much on the margins of society. Again, what is needed is a global reduction of greenhouse gases by at least 50%.

### 13. A moral crisis?

Following such a critique of consumerism, many others, including politicians like Al Gore and spiritual leaders like Desmond Tutu have argued that climate change presents us not only with a cultural crisis but also with a moral crisis. Again, one needs to speak of a moral crisis carefully as this may sound like yet another call for moral rearmament or for another wave of the moral regeneration movement, and another moral summit in South Africa.<sup>25</sup> The current situation clearly calls for moral judgement. It is a matter of justice since those who are likely to be most affected by climate change have contributed least to the problem.<sup>26</sup> This is widely recognised in climate negotiations with differentiated responsibilities around mitigation and the allocation of funds for adaptation. Why would one then speak about a moral *crisis*? The answer may be simple, namely that justice is not yet seen to be done. If we are collectively unable to change the current situation that implies that the injustices will continue. Of course, this cannot be done overnight – which allows space for sloth. The very failure of climate negotiations suggests that those responsible are not yet agreeing to take responsibility for mitigation and adaptation (including the transfer of technology and skills) by protecting their own interests in relation to other role players. In response to this lingering situation ecumenical bodies also in southern

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<sup>23</sup> See SACC 2009:15.

<sup>24</sup> For a survey of Christian literature offering a critique of consumerism see Conradie 2009.

<sup>25</sup> See Richardson 2003.

<sup>26</sup> The SACC Document on climate grasps the core of the problem:

Thus far climate change has resulted mainly from the carbon footprint of the consumer class. However the attempts of others to copy this lifestyle will worsen the problem in years to come. Climate change is therefore deeply related to the skewed distribution of wealth. It is quite understandable that the poor, as well as those in the so-called middle class, would desire to share in the wealth that is so visibly portrayed in our society and through the media. This merely illustrates that the lifestyles of people in the consumer class are unsustainable since such lifestyles cannot be copied by all. Moreover, in years to come those of us with low carbon emissions will have to suffer the consequences of the economic activities of those with higher emissions.

The levels of consumption enjoyed by the affluent (in South Africa) therefore raise serious questions of global justice. Such consumption levels can only be sustained at the expense of others – the poor, coming generations and other living organisms. It would simply be impossible for the planet’s entire human population to replicate the lifestyle of the affluent centre. The solution cannot imply a system of consumer apartheid that upholds affluent binge habits but denies the poor a decent standard of living. The affluent seemed to have wreaked environmental havoc so that they might attain a comfortable and healthy lifestyle. They are clearly not in the position to caution others not to seek a comparable standard of living, giving as reason that it would jeopardise ecological sustainability.

It should therefore be abundantly clear that climate change raises issues of justice concerning a fair distribution of wealth, opportunities, responsibilities and also of the global costs for adaptation to the impact of climate change (p. 30).

Africa are insisting on the recognition of “ecological debt”.<sup>27</sup>

Climate change also calls for moral judgement in terms of at least two other moral standards, namely participatory decision making (allowing those most affected by change a say) and, of course, ecological sustainability. The moral vision behind these criteria have already been articulated in 1975 at the Nairobi Assembly of the World Council of Churches with its notion of “towards a Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society”. The Vancouver Assembly in 1983 then initiated the Conciliar process on “Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation”, culminating in the World Convocation on JPIC in Seoul in 1990. Climate change requires attention to all three the underlying moral problems, namely economic inequalities and injustice, conflict at different levels and ecological destruction – in relation to each other. These moral standards are also expressed in the 16 principles of the Earth Charter and in many other documents from religious forums.

A reminder of these moral standards may be helpful but still does not seem to address the root of the moral crisis. Is our main problem that we do not know and recognise these standards? The danger is that prophetic critiques of the global economic order and of climate negotiations can merely result in judgemental moral judgements. Then the prophet can merely shake her head or shrug his shoulders wondering why on earth people are not doing what is obviously the right thing to do. Others have recognised that more is at stake, namely the need for moral leadership, moral courage, moral vision and moral imagination. The task of a prophet is not merely to denounce evil and injustices but also to inspire people with an attractive vision for the future, or a way out of the current dilemma, helping them to see what the next appropriate step is.

This points to a different crisis, namely a lack of moral imagination and a moral vision. In a *Message from African faith leaders to the 17<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Parties (COP17)* following a meeting at UNEP in Nairobi, 7-8 June 2011, this need for a moral vision is clearly recognised. The statement observes that “there is a profound need for a renewed moral vision for the future of humanity and indeed of all life. We debase human beings by seeing them only as economic instruments, and debase the sanctity of life by commodifying it.” It then continues:

We must realise that well-being cannot be equated with material wealth. The quality of life is not dependent on the quantity of material things or growth measured by GDP. Instead, our standard of living depends on our standard of loving and sharing. We cannot sustain a world dominated by profit-seeking, rampant consumerism and gross inequalities, and an atmosphere of competition where the powerful take advantage of the weak without caring for the well-being of every form of life. Development cannot be sustained if the affluent project themselves as examples to be copied by everyone else, and if the poor model their lifestyles on such examples.<sup>28</sup>

In its document on climate change the South African Council of Churches observes that “We live in a time that lacks a compelling moral vision, even though most businesses and institutions continually talk about their vision and mission”.<sup>29</sup> The document adds that, “It is indeed a matter

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<sup>27</sup> See SACC document includes as Addendum C the “Declaration of the Fellowship of Christian Council in Southern Africa (FOCCISA) on ecological debt and climate change”. Drawing from WCC statements, ecological debt is defined as: “Ecological debt refers to damage caused over time to ecosystems, places and peoples through production and consumption patterns; and the exploitation of ecosystems at the expense of the equitable rights of other countries, communities or individuals. It is primarily the debt owed by industrialized countries in the North to countries of the South on account of historical and current resource plundering, environmental degradation and the disproportionate appropriation of ecological space to dump greenhouse gases (GHGs) and toxic wastes. It is also the debt owed by economically and politically powerful national elites to marginalized citizens; the debt owed by current generations of humanity to future generations; and, on a more cosmic scale, the debt owed by humankind to other life forms and the planet. It includes social damages such as the disintegration of indigenous and other communities (p. 31).

<sup>28</sup> This communique was compiled jointly by 130 faith leaders representing Muslim, Christian, Hindu, African traditional, Bahá’í and Buddhist communities from 30 countries across Africa. It was circulated electronically.

<sup>29</sup> SACC 2009:40.

of moral vision. We need to envisage alternatives to the current global economic order that has caused climate change – alternatives that will be able to *generate* sufficient wealth, *distribute* such wealth more equitably and help to *redefine* our very understanding of what wealth entails. Such a vision needs to be attractive enough to motivate millions of people, to energise and mobilise action.”<sup>30</sup>

#### 14. A spiritual crisis?

It is a liberal fallacy to assume that knowledge and education forms the only key to moral action. If we know from science that we have to do something, why we have to that and how to do that (technology) but still find ourselves unable to do so, that is no longer only a moral but also a spiritual problem. For Christians that is a familiar problem: we know that we need to love our neighbours as ourselves but often find that rather hard to do. More knowledge is not really required here. Likewise, almost all adult South Africans know what to do to avoid contracting the HI-virus, but this has not stopped the pandemic from spreading. Not only prophetic moral imperatives are needed, but also moral will and moral energy.

That the problem is highly complex becomes apparent when one realises that even those who have developed an acute environmental awareness often find it difficult to translate an awareness of ecological concerns into appropriate forms of praxis. As the SACC document states,

Those of us in the urban middle class find it difficult to adopt a lifestyle that is not harmful to the environment. We may take some modest steps to address climate change – such as reducing the use of electricity, water, transport and chemicals, while recycling and re-using resources. Such steps are highly appropriate to challenge consumerist habits and demand considerable effort and dedication. However, a guilty conscience and a 10% reduction in resource usage would not nearly be sufficient, given the scale of the problem. By contrast, those of us who are poor lack the resources to alter our squalid living conditions and to steer away from the (comparatively minute) environmental damage that we do cause. We naturally desire to obtain more of the wealth that we observe around us – but we can scarcely be concerned about the impact that what we desire (but do not yet have and perhaps have little hope in getting) would have.<sup>31</sup>

To address the environmental crisis will demand much more than what science and new technologies may offer. In their foreword to the series on world religions and ecology, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim comments:

It is becoming increasingly evident that abundant scientific knowledge of the crisis is available and numerous political and economic statements have been formulated. Yet we seem to lack the political, economic, and scientific leadership to make necessary changes. Moreover, what is still lacking is the religious commitment, moral imagination, and ethical engagement to transform the environmental crisis from an issue on paper to one of effective policy, from rhetoric in print to realism in action.<sup>32</sup>

Patricia Mische adds the following:

Science and technology alone cannot resolve ecological threats. Nor can governments or the laws they promulgate. ... Sustaining the integrity of creation thus requires not only the external laws governments enact to deal with belligerent behavior, but also inner governance, laws internalised in our hearts and minds and the will to live by them. The need for inner governance is relevant not only to personal behavior, but also collective behavior through the economic, social and political systems we create and help maintain. Church praxis has special relevance for the development of inner governance and a culture of ecological responsibility. Religions carry the archetypes, symbols, meanings, values and moral codes around which people coalesce and define themselves, their sense of the sacred, and their relationships with each other and the natural world.<sup>33</sup>

The deepest crisis therefore seems to be one of a lack of moral vision, imagination, will and

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<sup>30</sup> SACC 2009:39.

<sup>31</sup> SACC 2009:19.

<sup>32</sup> Tucker & Grim 2000:xix.

<sup>33</sup> Mische 2000:592-3.

leadership. The problem is one that has to be addressed through moral formation and not merely through more information. It is not simply a matter of agreeing with a memorandum spelling out some common values either. Since moral formation typically takes place within faith communities, this implies that the ecological transformation of religious traditions is critical to the emergence of an ecological ethos.

In the light of these considerations, the spiritual dimensions of the environmental crisis have to be acknowledged. What is required a fundamental change of orientation. As Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew 1 of Constantinople has observed on the issue of climate change: "Climate change is much more than an issue of environmental preservation. Insofar as human-induced, it is a profoundly moral and spiritual problem. To persist in the current path of ecological destruction is not only folly. It is no less than suicidal, jeopardizing the diversity of the very earth that we inhabit, enjoy and share."<sup>34</sup> A "Declaration on the Environment" signed by Patriarch Bartholomew and Pope John Paul II on 10 June 2002 expresses a similar assessment:

What is required is an act of repentance on our part and a renewed attempt to view ourselves, one another, and the world around us within the perspective of the divine design for creation. The problem is not simply economic and technological; it is moral and spiritual. A solution at the economic and technological level can be found only if we undergo, in the most radical way, an inner change of heart, which can lead to a change in lifestyle and of unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. A genuine conversion in Christ will enable us to change the way we think and act.

Several observers have recognised the potential of the world's religious traditions to offer the necessary inspiration, spiritual vision, ecological wisdom, ethical discernment, moral power and hope to sustain an ecological transformation. Accordingly, religious traditions can offer the mystic motivation and enthusiasm for earthkeeping projects that no other secular or government initiatives can muster on such a wide scale. Religious traditions can provide what science *qua* science cannot: they promise, not only meaning, but also survival power, deliverance, healing, well-being.<sup>35</sup> Religions provide basic interpretive stories of who we are, what nature is, where we have come from, and where we are going.<sup>36</sup> In a statement at the Bali meeting on climate change in December 2007 Ahmed Djoghlaif, of Algeria, the executive secretary of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity stated, "In my view there are three ways to reach people: through their wallets, their health and their soul ... The first two are certainly current, the third has yet to be achieved. I would warmly welcome a far higher level of engagement by faith groups in biodiversity issues."<sup>37</sup> Tucker and Grim capture the significance of the role of faith communities succinctly:

Can the world's religious traditions (whether literate and pre-literate) muster sufficient moral power and vision to turn the tide, to show a path out of the maze of ongoing environmental degradation? Indeed, can religious discourse really make a difference? It seems clear that this will require nothing less than a transformation of each tradition (preferably in terms of each tradition's own heritage and particularity). Larry Rasmussen urges that all religious and moral impulses of whatever sort must now be matters of unqualified earthbound loyalty and care. Each faith has to become an earth-centred faith.<sup>38</sup>

For the Christian tradition this poses a particularly stark challenge. The biblical roots of Christianity articulate a moral vision through a number of core symbols. It speaks of shalom, of the coming reign of God, of a new Jerusalem, of a new heaven and new earth where the lion and the lamb will live together peacefully, where justice and peace will embrace each other, where

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<sup>34</sup> Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Statement for the WCC Working Group on Climate Change. In: WCC 2005:67.

<sup>35</sup> See Rasmussen 1994:177, 1996:185.

<sup>36</sup> Tucker & Grim 2000:xvi

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in a report by Vanya Walker-Leigh, electronically distributed through the December 2007 Forum on Religion and Ecology Newsletter.

<sup>38</sup> Rasmussen 1996:10.

God's loyalty will allow the earth to flourish (Psalm 85:10-11).

The SACC document on climate changes recognises the challenge in no uncertain terms. It states:

It is deeply worrying that we as Christians, too, so often seem unable to portray through our witness and action the alternative that is required. This is strange because the Jewish-Christian tradition has such a cherished heritage in this regard. In fact, many Christians have been supporting a vision that is currently proving to be destructive. We have placed our faith and trust in human ingenuity, scientific progress and technological innovation. We believe that knowledge and education (or suitable qualifications) will offer us, and especially our children a ticket to prosperity. We have followed the secular dreams of increasing prosperity and economic development. We have come to follow a lifestyle (or to hope to be able to adopt one) that is unsustainable and cannot be adopted by all others. We have been captured by the lure of what could now be described in terms of the ideologies of consumerism, hedonism or materialism. This means that the focus of our hopes, trust and enjoyment is to gather wealth, to be able to buy and consume whatever our hearts desire, and to pursue a life of pleasure.<sup>39</sup>

The document continues to speak of the need for prophetic critique but also of the danger of idolatry and heresy. It recognises that "The most overt way in which the consumer society is defended theologically is through the propagation of the prosperity gospel."<sup>40</sup> Perhaps, at least from a theological point of view, this is the deepest crisis that we have to face. Theologically, the flaws of this heresy are not difficult to identify. However, given the corporatisation of universities, the commercialisation of religious products and the adaptation of churches to the consumer society it is hard so see how a sophisticated theological critique of such idolatries and heresies could be credible.

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<sup>39</sup> SACC 2009:41.

<sup>40</sup> SACC 2009:46.