

## **A Christian Vision Of Human Flourishing**

### **Abstract**

*This paper works from the premise that current mainstream conceptions of human flourishing are inadequate, narrow and ultimately injurious to individuals, society and environment. It argues for a Christian understanding of human flourishing, which is rooted in those characteristics that humans share with other created beings (created, material, dependent, interconnected) and those that are uniquely human (the creative, productive, responsible, relational stewardship inherent in the image of God). It argues that to flourish as a human means having the opportunity to exercise our God-given gifts of creativity and productivity in such a way as contributes generously to the common good and thereby to the glory of God. The paper recognises that, according to Christian theology, full human flourishing is not in the gift of government or even attainable on earth. However, it argues that government does have a role to play in securing the conditions by means of which people may work towards this vision. In concrete terms, with specific reference to questions of (a) governance, (b) economics and (c) environment, this vision would mean:*

*(a) enabling individuals and their communities to contribute meaningfully to debates that are relevant to them; ensuring that decisions are made as close as possible to the lives of the people they affect; maintaining the accountability of those who make those decisions; and orienting all governance towards the needs of those who are vulnerable and excluded from local, national and global society.*

*(b) cultivating an economic system that enables the participation and contribution of all to our common life; which itself means ensuring that all have a level of subsistence, healthcare and education that permits their participation and contribution. It also means securing employment conditions in which human dignity and human vocations are well served.*

*(c) securing equitable access to natural resources for all; making use of those resources in such a way as is compatible with their sustained productivity and the needs of future generations; and maintaining a long-term perspective on*

*environmental issues that elevates environmental commitment above short-term political vicissitudes.*

## **Introduction**

In his 2009 Reith Lectures and his subsequent book, *Justice*, the Harvard political philosopher Michael Sandel outlined three competing conceptions of justice: promoting virtue, maximising welfare and respecting freedom.

The first position, promoting virtue, was the dominant one in the ancient world and contends that justice is about giving people what they merit. It is, in essence, about recognising and honouring the purpose of any good or person.

The second position, maximising welfare, is that of classic utilitarianism, in which the just action is the one which promotes the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people.

The third position, respecting freedom, argues that, partly because we all disagree on what is good and partly because no-one has the right to impose their concept of the good on others, law should be neutral towards competing conceptions of virtue. In this scenario, justice entails giving people as much freedom as possible so that they may choose their own ends.

Although coming in different flavours (in particular libertarian and egalitarian forms of liberalism), it is this position – the idea of justice as freedom and law as neutral to our conceptions of the good – that has been dominant in the West over recent years. Both the right – with its emphasis on the marketplace as a means of respecting and responding to people's free choice – and the new (as opposed to old, Socialist) left – with its emphasis on the state as the means of bringing all into a position whereby they can exercise choice fairly and freely – draw their inspiration from the idea of justice as freedom. Our objective, our motivation in the way we order society is to afford everyone the maximum possible freedom to make their own choices.

Over the last thirty years, Sandel, along with a number of other political theorists like Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre, have argued that this 'liberal' position is inadequate. In reality, neither 'justice as maximising welfare' nor 'justice as respecting freedom' is neutral or value-free. Both smuggle ideas of the good into their thinking under other guises, through conceptions such as 'efficiency' or 'rationality'.

*Debates about justice and rights are often, unavoidably, debates about the purpose of social institutions, the goods they allocate, and the virtues they honor and reward. Despite our best attempts to make law neutral on such questions, it may not be possible to say what's just without arguing about the nature of the good life.<sup>1</sup>*

This remains a controversial view. As Sandel observes, talk of introducing particular concepts of the good into public discourse, especially those derived from serious religious commitment, tends to terrify modern liberals, who automatically see visions of a fragmented, argumentative public square, the imposition of narrow, sectarian values on an unwilling majority and, ultimately, the nightmare of theocratic rule.

However, as Sandel also observes, the way in which liberals in America have ceded the ground of moral discourse to those who have fewer problems with introducing explicit moral and religious ideas and vocabulary into debate has hardly made for a healthy public debate. Moreover, as Sandel has written:

*Asking democratic citizens to leave their moral and religious convictions behind when they enter the public realm may seem a way of ensuring toleration and mutual respect. In practice, however, the opposite can be true. Deciding important public questions while pretending to a neutrality that cannot be achieved is a recipe for backlash and resentment. A politics emptied of substantive moral engagement makes for an impoverished civic life. It is also an open invitation to narrow, intolerant moralisms. Fundamentalists rush in where liberals fear to tread.<sup>2</sup>*

Quite apart from such reasons of political pragmatism, there are at least two other reasons why the ground for a moral engagement in politics has opened up. The first is that the current situation, of justice as freedom, imagines that all “reasonable” people will be able to agree on certain ideas (usually relating to the moral supremacy of choice) and presupposes that, in effect, we are all the same – all liberal-minded humanists – under the skin. Yet this is demonstrably untrue.<sup>3</sup> In the words of the political scientist Jonathan Chaplin:

*It will be rare today for any really important justifying reason to be equally accessible to all citizens, even “in principle”. Indeed, as societies become ever more religiously*

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right thing to do?* (Allen Lane, 2009) p. 207.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 243.

<sup>3</sup> And even if it were there has been much recent work to show that the supposedly ‘rational’ decisions that people make are nothing like as rational as we like to think. See, for example, George A Akerlof and Robert J Shiller, *Animal Spirits: How Human Psychology Drives the Economy, and Why it Matters for Global Capitalism* (Princeton University Press, 2009); R. Thaler and C. Sunstein, *Nudge* (Yale University Press, 2008); Paul Ormerod, *Butterfly Economics* (Basic Books, 2008); John Kay, *The Truth about Markets* (Penguin, 2003).

*and morally plural, we should be prepared for, not a growing consensus on the most important justifying reasons, but a growing dissensus.*<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the idea of a supposedly neutral public square places an unfair burden on those who do think differently, demanding of them that they surrender their most profound beliefs and hopes – what, in effect, makes them *them* – before they engage in debate.

Second, it can have detrimental consequences, not least in those areas, such as our engagement with future generations or the environment, where the dominant liberal idea of the contract runs into difficulties. “Conceiving persons as free and independent selves...make[s] a difference for questions of collective responsibility across generations.”<sup>5</sup>

There remains controversy surrounding the idea that justice should involve ‘promoting virtue’ or, put less threateningly, that justice demands serious moral discourse which can, indeed must draw on particular ethical and religious viewpoints. Despite this, it may be that the dominant idea of justice as freedom is losing its hold. Intellectual weaknesses, pragmatic reality, and social and environmental consequences all suggest that we should be willing to re-examine the basic building blocks of the social, economic and political order in a way that openly and unapologetically draws on particular conceptions of the good.

As Rowan Williams remarked in his Operation Noah lecture, “So much of what’s wrong [in environmental and economic terms] has its roots in a shared cultural and spiritual crisis. The nature of that crisis could be summed up rather dramatically by saying that it’s a loss of a sense of what life is.”<sup>6</sup> The time is ripe for a re-examination of what we hope for from our society, a re-evaluation of what it means to flourish that draws openly on moral and religious commitments.

### **Who do we think we are?**

One of the key arguments that Sandel, Taylor and other so-called communitarians make against modern ‘Rawlsian’ liberalism is that it is based on a fundamentally flawed concept of human nature. Modern liberal thought “conceive[s] the moral agent as independent of his or her particular aims and attachments.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Chaplin, *Talking God* (Theos, 2008)

<sup>5</sup> Sandel, op cit.

<sup>6</sup> Rowan Williams, “The Climate Crisis: A Christian Response” Operation Noah annual lecture, Southwark Cathedral, 13 October 2009, <http://www.operationnoah.org/node/90>.

<sup>7</sup> Sandel, op cit. p. 215.

This view “seems to claim that a human being’s capacity autonomously to choose its ends is not just one amongst many equally valuable capacities or features but rather forms the essence of her identity...It therefore follows that respect for human autonomy is not just one value amongst many but an absolutely fundamental one which must always trump any other; for to fail to respect that capacity is to fail to respect a metaphysically fundamental feature of personhood.”<sup>8</sup>

According to this view humans are *fundamentally* choice-bearing creatures, a fact that must be reflected in the way we order society. It is here that any engagement with the idea of human flourishing must begin. What is the Christian concept of human nature and how does it differ from that outlined above? The answer to this will affect how we look to shape and structure political, social and economic order.

### **Shared characteristics: Created, material, dependent, interconnected**

The Christian understanding of human nature begins with the idea of creation. Humans are *created* beings. Time and again, biblical teaching suggests “that we have more in common with the rest of the animate creation than in distinction from it...createdness is glory, not shame.”<sup>9</sup> Humans are not ‘other than’ creation but part of it.

This is important not least because failing to grasp our ‘creatureliness’ (to use an ugly word) and the implications of that (see below) will have a significant impact on the way in which we conceptualise and treat the rest of the created order.

*One of the underlying, evasive, moral and imaginative questions that arises in thinking about climate change and the wider environmental agenda is...this ingrained tradition of behaving as if we didn't belong, as if we were not part of an interactive system, as if we were brains on stalks.*<sup>10</sup>

Being created means being material, being part of creation and sharing that ‘createdness’ with other creatures. The dualism that has affected much Christian thought throughout history, seeing the essence of human beings as a soul that temporarily inhabits a frail and disposal material case, has little basis in scripture. God creates a world that includes human beings and that is repeatedly affirmed as “good”.

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<sup>8</sup> Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians* (Wiley-Blackwell; 2nd Edition, 1996) pp. 46-47.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher JH Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (IVP, 2010)

<sup>10</sup> Rowan Williams, “Climate Change: a Moral Issue”, Address to the Tyndall Centre (4 May 2006)  
<http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/372>

God also remains engaged with that material creation and assumes a part in and of it in the incarnation. Christ's life is recognised and criticised for its material indulgence – a ministry of eating and drinking with undesirables. He repeatedly pictured eternal life as a banquet to which all are invited. As his own life drew to a close, he gathered around him many of his closest friends and instituted the sharing of material food and drink which serves, in part, as a foretaste of that banquet. His resurrection is the firstfruit of the transformation of the material creation which points towards a more complete transformation in the fullness of time. The resurrection both vindicates creation and opens up possibilities for its transformation.

Humans are called to participate in his material life, “clothing” themselves with Christ (Romans 13.14) and becoming members of one “body” by dwelling in Christ (Romans 12:5). To be human means not simply to be a part of creation, but to be a stubbornly material part of that creation. To be in Christ is to partake in “a sharing of material food which makes us sharers in eternal life; of a community whose life together seeks to express within creation the care of the creator.”<sup>11</sup> It is not to escape our material condition but to affirm it.

If our createdness emphasises our materiality, it also emphasises our *creatureliness*. This is a particularly uncomfortable idea for our contemporary understanding of human nature, with its singular focus on choice. Choice is fundamentally about our ability to assess and act on evidence, of human beings operating as subjects rather than objects. While there is a critical theme in the Christian concept of human nature that concurs with this view, there is also a strand that understands that humans are *creatures*, meaning dependent beings.

Although possessing the capacity to act as subjects, we are also objects, not only created beings but ones that depend on God's generosity and grace if we are to flourish, creatures who are part of a creation that is sustained and upheld by Christ himself. (Hebrews 1.3) This has profound implications on our attitude to creation and, in particular, on our environmental ethics.

*The danger of the misuse of material goods and the appearance of artificial needs should in no way hinder the regard we have for the new goods and resources placed at our disposal and the use we make of them. On the contrary, we must see them as a gift from God and as a response to the human vocation, which is fully realized in Christ.*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Williams, “The Climate Crisis”, op cit. <http://www.operationnoah.org/node/90>.

<sup>12</sup> John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, #29

That creatureliness is also, importantly, a *shared* creatureliness. Although there is a critical difference between humans and other sentient creatures, to which we shall turn below, there is also a shared bond of dependent createdness. “We are creatures, not divine but part of the ‘unbreakable kinship of all God’s creatures.’”<sup>13</sup> The Bible emphasises the point, particularly in the opening creation narratives and in the story of Noah, that “there is no way in which we can grasp human dignity and value it independently of human life’s involvement with all other life.”<sup>14</sup>

If the stark fact of human createdness encourages us to see creation as a gift rather than a right, still less simply a resource, the awareness of sharing a bond with fellow creatures emphasises the ideas of connectedness and interdependence.

### **Unique characteristics: *Imago dei***

Humans, then, are creatures – created, material, dependent, interconnected. But they are particular types of creatures, ones that are made in and for a unique and uniquely important role.

Humans are created, famously, “in the image of God” (Gen. 1.26-27), a phrase that may have caused more discussion than any other ever written. Broadly speaking, there are three interpretations of it.

The first is *substantial*: being made in the image of God means having some particular quality. It means being endowed with certain gifts, historically and variously understood to be rationality, morality, self-awareness, creativity, or some combination of these.

The second is *functional*: being made in the image of God means we have a particular job to do, a job that is defined either in biblical terms of ‘ruling over’ creation (Gen. 1.26), ‘subdu[ing]’ it (Gen. 1.28), “work[ing]...and tak[ing] care of it” (Gen. 2.15) and “nam[ing]” it (Gen. 2.19), or alternatively in not-quite-so-obviously biblical terms of ‘stewardship’ or ‘vice-regency’.

The third definition is *relational*: being made in the image of God means existing in relationship to him and to creation in a way that reflects something of God’s own irreducibly

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<sup>13</sup> Claire Foster, *Sharing God’s Planet: A Christian vision for a sustainable future* (Church House Publishing, 2005)

<sup>14</sup> Williams, “The Climate Crisis”, op cit. <http://www.operationnoah.org/node/90>.

relational, Trinitarian nature. Being made in God's image means being made in the image of an ultimate reality that is both personal and relational.

There is, of course, no reason to believe that the substantial, functional and relational definitions of the *imago dei* are exclusive. Indeed they may not even be separable. To fulfil our relationship with God and within creation means using our uniquely human gifts so as to fulfil our uniquely human function of acting as vice-regents of creation. Only by combining all three elements do we appropriate the full image of God, which is the source of our full human flourishing. Given the significance of the *imago dei* in human nature and thereby to human flourishing, each of these qualities demands some attention.

### ***Substantial: Creative, productive***

The idea that humans have a particular, distinct quality which differentiates them from the rest of the created order has a long history. Writing in the second century, the church father Irenaeus drew a distinction between 'image' and 'likeness' mentioned in Genesis 1, suggesting that "the former refers to humanity's natural rational and moral capacities while the latter refers to the spiritual aspect of the human condition that had been lost through sin but restored through grace."<sup>15</sup>

This thinking was influential in classical theology which, under the influence of Hellenistic thinking, saw a clear separation between body and soul. Soul and body were thought to be separate though related substances, with the knowing, rational soul presiding over the corruptible and corrupting body.

It was, however, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that the idea of humanity's uniquely rational and moral capacities gained particular attention. Our capacity to understand, navigate and control the world is unmatched by any other species and that is largely due to our ability to think rationally.

*The Enlightenment preoccupation with what is universal in the human condition was influenced both by the classical Christian view that what defines humanity is the soul rather than the body, and by the conviction that reason could be used to define the essence of the human animal.*<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, "Human being, individual and social" in Colin E Gunton, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge University Press, 1997)

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

Enormously influential as it has been, however, there are some problems in tracing back to scripture this idea that the *imago dei* is a fundamental rational quality. This is not to say that humans are *not* rational animals or that other creatures share the human capacity for rational thought (although there is some evidence that, in some measure, some do). Rather it is to say that if we are seeking a *substantial* definition of the *imago dei*, we are unlikely to find it in our rational capacities. More fruitful is the idea that humans are uniquely creative animals.

The God in whose image we are made is a *creative* God. The image in Genesis 1-2 is of an industrious God, speaking creation into existence and ordering it in a way that is pleasing to him, an image that is filled out by the New Testament writers who describe how the world is sustained through Christ, “by his powerful word” (Heb 1.3), “in [whom] all things hold together” (Col. 1.16–17).

Humanity is made in the image of this God, invited to participate in the creative ordering of creation through the call to work the soil and cultivate and care for the Garden of Eden. (Gen. 1.29; 2.5-6). Work, as Catholic Social Teaching observes, “is part of the original state of man and precedes his fall; it is therefore not a punishment or curse.”<sup>17</sup> It becomes a punishment and curse only in the fallout of the fall of Genesis 3, when Adam is told that ground has become “cursed” because his actions. (Gen. 3-17-19) Notwithstanding these consequences, the image of the creative God and the task of creative industry that humans are given remain unaltered. God is a creator God. Humans are made in his image and charged with co-creative work.

Christ, it is worth noting, placed a similar emphasis on work, after having spent many years himself working as a carpenter. (Mark 6.33) He described his mission as “work” (John 5.17) and used the example of work a number of times in his teaching, such as in the parable that condemns the lazy servant who hides his talent in the ground (Mt. 25.14-30) or in his praise of the faithful servant whom the Master finds hard at work at the duties entrusted to him. (Mt. 24.46) He also sends out his disciples as workers, whose task is metaphorically agricultural: “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” (Mt 9:37-38).

Overall, although humans are undoubtedly moral and rational in a way that is not matched by any other creatures, it is in their creativity and productivity that these qualities are deployed, and it is in their creativity and productivity that we more clearly locate the distinctive substantial qualities of the *imago dei*.

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<sup>17</sup> *Compendium of Social Doctrine of the Church*, #256

**Functional: Steward, vice-regent, responsible**

Humans are tasked with a particular duty, one that is intrinsic to who they are. Genesis 1.26-27 (and, after it, Psalm 8) links the fact that humanity is made in the image of God directly to its role within creation: “So God created man in his own image...blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea...’”

As Rowan Williams has remarked, “the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2 see the creation of humanity as quite specifically the creation of an agent, a person, who can care for and protect the animal world, reflecting the care of God himself who enjoys the goodness of what he has made.”<sup>18</sup>

This suggests that the ‘image of God’ is not simply a static quality, such as having creativity (or rationality or morality) but is, rather, a dynamic one, demanding the deployment of these (and other) qualities in fulfilling God’s mandate to fill, subdue and rule the earth.

This command “to subdue” is a translation of the Hebrew word *kabash*, which is used elsewhere in the Old Testament in the context of conquering the Promised Land. It is therefore a strong use of the word, and could be seen to legitimise the exploitative use that previous generations have sometimes advocated.

This potentially exploitative interpretation is erroneous, however, for two reasons. The first is that it fails to recognise that “ruling” should not be understood in “autocratic or despotic” terms of doing what you like, but may instead be read in terms shaped by the Old Testament’s idea of kingship.

*Old Testament kings were called to exercise their reign with due regard to the well-being of their subjects, other creatures and the land. The intention of the command ‘to have dominion’ is to call those made in the image of God to rule in a way that reflects the teaching given by God.*<sup>19</sup>

The theoretical model of an Old Testament king – there were precious few real-life ones – is the servant-king who “speak[s] up for those who cannot speak for themselves,/ for the rights

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<sup>18</sup> Williams, “The Climate Crisis”, op cit. <http://www.operationnoah.org/node/90>.

<sup>19</sup> Eco-congregation, *Module 3: Creation and Christianity*, <http://ew.ecocongregation.org/system/files/resources-module3.pdf>

of all who are destitute./ [Who] Speaks up and judges fairly;/ [and] defends the rights of the poor... [and] disadvantaged.” (Proverbs 31.4-9)

The second reason why the exploitative interpretation is wrong is that it detaches the command “to rule” from others given to humankind in Genesis. “Subduing” and “ruling”, however understood, do not comprise the *only* creation mandate. Genesis 2.15 recounts how “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.”

This phrase “to work it and take care of it”, also sometimes translated “to till and to keep”, can just as accurately be translated “to serve and preserve”.<sup>20</sup> In doing so, the phrase emphasises the “servant” aspects of the servant king. The commands to rule and have dominion in the first creation story are liable to be misunderstood if divorced from the commands to serve and preserve in the second one.

It is worth noting that the Hebrew words which are here translated “serve and preserve” occur together only once else in the Pentateuch, in the book of Numbers, to describe of duty of the Levites in ministering in the sanctuary. As one Old Testament scholar points out, Eden seems to be depicted as God’s sanctuary, and Adam as “an archetypal Levite”, a priest in God’s garden.<sup>21</sup>

Such a view gives a solid biblical foundation to an idea, more commonly found in the Orthodox Christian tradition, that humanity is the Priest of Creation, created to unite all nature to God. In this way, humankind’s role “as [creation’s] ruler is a necessary condition for the rest of creation to fulfil its own ordering. His rule is to be the rule which liberates other beings to be, to be in themselves, to be for others, to be for God.”<sup>22</sup>

Another important element of human ‘stewardship’ is located in the story in Genesis 2, where God, having “formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air”, brings them to Adam, “to see what he would name them”: “and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.”

This is important and part of humanity’s ruling over the rest of creation. Naming creatures implies knowing them in a way that permits “dominion”.

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<sup>20</sup> Hilary Marlow, *The Earth is the Lord's: A Biblical Response to Environmental Issues*, (Grove, 2008)

<sup>21</sup> Gordon Wenham, “Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story”, *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies* (1986).

<sup>22</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order* (William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1996) p. 38.

*Knowledge is the characteristically human way of participating in the cosmic order. Man takes his place, which is the place of 'dominion', by knowing the created beings around him in a way that they do not know him...Knowledge is the root of his authority over his fellow-creatures.*<sup>23</sup>

The division in the second creation story – between the God who creates and the Adam who is permitted to name – is profound, as it further underlines humankind's role within creation: having authority over creation but only because he is under God's authority. This authority is lost in the fall but, again, recaptured in Christ.

*In Christ man was able for the first time to assume his proper place within it, the place of dominion assigned to Adam...He has the authority to designate the character of the reality which he encounters...This kind of authority of not a challenge to the authority of God; it is a restoration of Adam's lordship in the natural order, the lordship by which he calls things by their names.*<sup>24</sup>

Hence, the image of God has a profound functional element. To flourish as a human means not only to have the opportunity to exercise our God-given creativity and productivity, but to exercise them responsibly, for the wholeness of creation, human and non-human, and to the glory of God.

This fact has obvious implications for social justice, and is linked to the idea that creation is a gift. "From the patristic period to the present, the church has affirmed that misuse of the world's resources or appropriation of them by a minority of the world's population betrays the gift of creation since 'whatever belongs to God belongs to all.'"<sup>25</sup>

It also has implications for the significance of human work, the task by which we honour both the substantial and the functional aspects of the *imago dei*. In the words of *Gaudium et Spes*:

*By the work of our hands or with the help of technology, we till the earth to produce fruit and to make it a dwelling place fit for all of humanity; we also play our part in the life of social groups. In so doing we are realizing God's plan, revealed at the beginning of time, to subdue the earth and perfect the work of creation; at the same*

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 81.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 24.

<sup>25</sup> U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* (1986), #34

*time we are perfecting ourselves and observing the command of Christ to devote ourselves to the service of our sisters and brothers.*<sup>26</sup>

The functional element has implications for environmental as well as social justice. To be human is to be a gardener of creation. “Humanity is given the task of ‘cultivating’ the garden of Eden... [we] are endowed with the responsibility to preserve and direct the powers of nature. In this process, we become more fully and joyfully who and what we are...Our own fulfilment is bound up with the work of conserving and focusing those powers.”<sup>27</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, the biblical narrative often links human obedience (or the lack of it) with environmental flourishing (or degradation).

### **Relational**

The final way of understanding the *imago dei* is in relational terms. The God in whose image human beings are made is a Trinitarian God. “Being a person in the image and likeness of God ... involves existing in a relationship, in relation to the other ‘I’, because God himself, one and triune, is the communion of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>28</sup> “Man finds life and self-expression only in relationship.”<sup>29</sup> “To be human means to be called to interpersonal communion.”<sup>30</sup>

In the words of Pope Benedict XVI’s recent encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*:

*The Trinity is absolute unity insofar as the three divine Persons are pure relationality. The reciprocal transparency among the divine Persons is total and the bond between each of them complete, since they constitute a unique and absolute unity. God desires to incorporate us into this reality of communion as well: “that they may be one even as we are one” (Jn 17:22).*<sup>31</sup>

It is in this vein that the Orthodox theologian John Zizioulous talks of ‘being as communion’, in his book of the same name. To be is to be in relationship. Our independence is borne of our dependence, our rationality of our relationality. This, it will be clear, stands in very stark contrast to the idea of humans as independent, autonomous choice-making beings.

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<sup>26</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Second Vatican Council, 1965) #57.

<sup>27</sup> Rowan Williams, *Renewing the Face of the Earth: Human Responsibility and the Environment*, Ebor Lecture, 2009: <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/2351>

<sup>28</sup> *Compendium*, op cit. #34.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, #109.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, #33.

<sup>31</sup> Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, #54.

Humans, being made in the image of this Trinitarian God, are thus fundamentally and irreducibly relational. The first and most important axis of that communion is with God.

*The human person, in himself and in his vocation, transcends the limits of the created universe, of society and of history: his ultimate end is God himself, who has revealed himself to men in order to invite them and receive them into communion with himself.*<sup>32</sup>

This is important for a number of reasons, not least because it intimates how social and political systems are inadequate to the task of achieving full human flourishing (a point to which we shall return below).

This axis of communion with God serves as the basis for the other relationships that comprise full human identity and are intrinsic to full human flourishing. In the words of *Caritas in Veritate*:

*As a spiritual being, the human creature is defined through interpersonal relations. The more authentically he or she lives these relations, the more his or her own personal identity matures. It is not by isolation that man establishes his worth, but by placing himself in relation with others and with God. Hence these relations take on fundamental importance.*<sup>33</sup>

In this way, the relational aspect of human identity is closely linked to the sense of responsibility towards other humans, just as it is linked to the command to exercise responsibility towards the rest of creation.

This is perhaps most obviously evident in the quartet of the socially disenfranchised that appears regularly in the Old Testament: the poor, the alien, the orphan and the widow. Israel's self-identity as "aliens" ran deep within the nation's conscience (e.g. Leviticus 19:33-34, Leviticus 25) and the law contains numerous commands relating to the treatment of the poor, widow and orphaned. These were not simply abstract ethical instructions – ways of pleasing God – but central to who Israel was. To betray the poor, widow and orphaned was not simply to fail to reach certain moral standards but to fail to be Israel. It was to ignore or abuse the image of 'a royal priesthood' or 'a holy nation' in which God had made them, and to turn aside from his vision of human flourishing to one that was narrower and more selfish.

The God who formed and nurtured Israel is, in the words of Psalm 146, the God who "upholds the cause of the oppressed/ and gives food to the hungry... sets prisoners free...

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<sup>32</sup> *Compendium*, op cit. #47.

<sup>33</sup> *Caritas in Veritate*, op cit. #53.

gives sight to the blind...lifts up those who are bowed down... loves the righteous... watches over the alien/ and sustains the fatherless and the widow.” (Psalm 146.7-9) To be his people was to be the people who lived similarly, acting personally and constituting their society so as to uphold and sustain those of whom the Psalmist wrote.

This lay at the heart of the prophets’ accusations against the nation. Its sin was “to deprive the poor of their rights/ and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people,/ making widows their prey/ and robbing the fatherless.” (Isaiah 10.2) The people do “not say to themselves, / ‘Let us fear the Lord our God,’ [but rather] have become rich and powerful and have grown fat and sleek... [failing to] plead the case of the fatherless... [or] defend the rights of the poor.” (Jeremiah 5.23-28) “They trample on the heads of the poor...and deny justice to the oppressed.” (Amos 2.7)

Israel’s failure led to its demise and thereafter its partial reconstitution in the post-exilic period. The mission and ministry of Christ embraced the Old Testament quartet of socially excluded but consciously extended it, to include those of whom Israel sang in Psalm 146.

Jesus describes his ministry to John’s disciples as one in which “the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.” (Matthew 11:5) “When you give a banquet,” Jesus tells one “prominent Pharisee”, “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.” (Luke 14.13)

This is the ministry that the early Church adopted, one in which “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus,” (Galatians 3:28) and where the first believers “[sold] their possessions and goods, [and] they gave to anyone as he had need.” (Acts 2.42) Clothing themselves with Christ (Romans 13.14, Galatians 3.27) or, put another way, accepting and appropriating true human identity, the true image of God given in Christ, meant for the New Testament Christians living a life of relational wholeness, in which obedience to their relational God was worked out in and through the relational integrity of the community that they built.

### ***Imago dei: summary***

The image of God offers an immensely rich, subtle and complex set of interlocking ideas relating to what it is to flourish as a human being. Over and above the shared qualities of being created, material, dependent, and interconnected, humans have certain distinguishing

characteristics. They are made in the image of God, to be creative and productive vice-regents of creation, responsible to God and for one another and the rest of created order in such a way as enables relational wholeness, addressing all the causes social exclusion – whether ethnic, physical, economic, medical, or spiritual.

This can seem like a farrago of ideas, although they can sometimes come together with concrete clarity. One such moment is towards the end of Paul's letter to the Ephesians where, in chapter 4, he urges his audience "to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." (Ephesians 4.1) This chapter contains much good advice, of both a negative kind ("Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice," Ephesians 4.31) and a positive kind ("Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love," Ephesians 4.1).

It also expands on such lists in such a way as to outline, in brief, the reasons *why* the Ephesians should re-appropriate the *imago dei*, or as Paul puts it, "be made new in the attitude of your minds; and...put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." (Ephesians 4.23) Thus, in verse 28, Paul advises, "He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need."<sup>34</sup>

All too often Christian morality can stop at the first clause – do not steal. Paul, however, goes further. We should not steal, not simply because that is a sound ethical stricture, but so that we can "work, doing something useful with [our] hands." Here we see how putting on the new, restored "self" means living constructive lives, being productive workers, growing and maturing by working with our own hands.

Crucially, though, Paul goes further still. Being creative and productive is good but there is a further purpose: "that he may have something to share with those in need." The Christian understanding of human identity and how we might fully flourish as humans is founded ultimately not on the idea that we should not steal, nor on the idea that we shouldn't steal *because* we are made to be creative and productive, but on the idea that we shouldn't steal *because* we are made to be creative and productive *and generous*. The ultimate end of our productive work is not just creativity and productivity but generosity. We should use our hands usefully in order that we can give what we create away. We are made not to have but to give.

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<sup>34</sup> There is an interesting parallel here with the wife of noble character in Proverbs 31, who, while not having any criminal record we know of, is described, among other ways, as working hard "with eager hands" and then 'open[ing] her arms to the poor and extend[ing] her hands to the needy.' (Pr. 31.20) Her flourishing clearly involved generosity as well as productivity.

This idea is articulated with particular clarity in *Caritas in Veritate*, which emphasises that “the human being is made for gift”.<sup>35</sup> More specifically, and in contrast to “giving in order to acquire (the logic of [market] exchange)” and “giving through duty (the logic of public obligation, imposed by State law)”, the Christian vision is one of giving for the sake of giving, of “gratuitousness”.<sup>36</sup> This is the Christian understanding and experience of God. “As the absolutely gratuitous gift of God, hope bursts into our lives as something not due to us, something that transcends every law of justice. Gift by its nature goes beyond merit, its rule is that of superabundance.”<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, it should be our lodestar when ordering society. So, for example, “in commercial relationships the principle of gratuitousness and the logic of gift as an expression of fraternity can and must find their place within normal economic activity.”<sup>38</sup>

This idea of creativity for the sake of generosity, of human gratuitousness, offers a neat and concrete impression of what the (renewed) *imago dei* entails and what, in consequence, full human flourishing demands. Our commission is to live in such a way as to exercise our human gifts of creativity and productivity in order that we may participate in and contribute fully towards our common life.

Paul, like the other New Testament writers, is insistent that that commission may only be fully realised by being “in Christ”, receiving the new selves that he wins for us on the Cross (and even then it never is – sin stubbornly gets in the way). This recognition is critical in underlining for us a point made above, that “the human person...transcends the limits of the created universe, of society and of history.” Politics alone will never deliver full human flourishing. That, however, does not mean it cannot make a vital contribution.

### **Human flourishing in context**

It is not within the remit of this paper (or the abilities of its author) to outline precisely how this vision of human flourishing should take form in modern social, political and economic thinking. However, it is worth exploring, albeit briefly, how it has been understood and interpreted within scripture and subsequent theological tradition. This will be done by taking each of the main policy areas, relating to governance, economics and environment in turn. These short discussions, it must be emphasised, should not be read as templates for

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<sup>35</sup> *Caritas in Veritate*, op cit. #34.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, #39.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, #34.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, #37.

modern policy thinking. Rather they are example of what the Christian idea of human flourishing can look like.

## **Governance**

Despite the popular impression, not without some justification, that Christianity has always favoured a highly unequal, monolithic and authoritarian system of government, of the “divine right of kings” variety, there has long been an important strand within Christian thought that has modified and moderated this. This is based on the fundamental idea that political or ‘civic’ governance is only one form of legitimate governance and is limited by other forms such as those located within the family, guild or church. This translated into the idea that political space was ‘complex’, and that individuals and their communities operated within various overlapping spheres of ‘political’ authority – individual conscience, family, community group, occupational group, church, city, region, nation, etc. – the arrangement of which allowed them to make a meaningful contribution to the course of their lives, to be “artisans of their own destiny” in Pope Paul VI’s phrase<sup>39</sup> – rather than treating them as recipients of a distant political ‘service provider’. This is an important element in the overall vision of human flourishing, in which all are enabled to participate in and contribute to our common life.

Old Testament Israel operated (again, in theory) a multipolar political system that encompassed six independent sources of authority, each with its own geographic jurisdiction. These were the individual, the family, the community, the Levites, the tribe (or region), and the nation. Between them they formed a network of concurrent authorities each instituted by God and protected, limited and empowered by the national ‘constitution’.<sup>40</sup>

This multipolar structure of political power in which different authorities were responsible for different areas was non-hierarchical. Individual or family authority was not automatically compliant to the edicts of larger state units. Marriage took precedence over military service for a year. (Deuteronomy 24.5) The king was subject to the law, as preserved and taught by the Levites. (Deuteronomy 17.14-20) The family’s criminal justice right to exact blood vengeance was mitigated by a national system of ‘vengeance free zones’ known as Cities of Refuge, and also by the sphere of Levitical authority, which would grant sanctuary to the criminal who grasped the horns of the altar. (Deuteronomy 19.4-7; Exodus 21.13)

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<sup>39</sup> *Populorum Progressio*, #65.

<sup>40</sup> See B. G. B. Logsdon, *Multipolarity and Covenant: Towards a Biblical Framework for Constitutional Safeguards*, (Jubilee Centre, 1989).

These various authority units reflected a concern for governance to operate on a variety of levels, being not simply a distant, abstract entity but an immediate and concrete fact of life, usually based on the natural ties of locality, community and family, and intended to give a positive incentive to maintaining productivity, social integration and individual worth.

The political power that was exercised, wherever it was exercised, was judged to be accountable to God. The king was charged with following the law, “read[ing] it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers.” (Deuteronomy 17.14-20) The mighty were commanded, by law and prophets, to remember the Almighty, just as in the subsequent history of Christian political thought, kings were always under the authority of the king of kings.

That subservience was intimately tied up with their duties of protecting the common welfare of the people, in particular those who could not protect their own. As we have already noted, the ideal king, as described in the book of Proverbs, was one who “speak[s] up for those who cannot speak for themselves,/ for the rights of all who are destitute./ [Who] Speaks up and judges fairly;/ [and] defends the rights of the poor... [and] disadvantaged.” (cf. Proverbs 31.4-9) Power was accountable to God for the way in which it served the needs of all, in particular the needy.

The fact that early Israel singularly failed to achieve such an objective should not surprise us any more than the manner in which Christian political thought often eschewed such a diffuse political structure, both in the ecclesiastical and temporal spheres in favour of a much more authoritarian one. This was most commonly seen in the use of Romans 13.1-7 during the Reformation where, for contemporary reasons, Protestant theologians placed very heavy weight on Paul’s command that “everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.” (v. 1)

That said, such authoritarian readings of this famous text were balanced by other elements within it. Paul’s teaching that “rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong” was heard as a limitation on political authority, with those rulers who terrorise those who do no wrong forfeiting their right to allegiance. Paul’s repeated emphasis on the fact that the ruler himself was God’s servant – he mentions that fact three times in three verses (“he is God’s servant to do you good...He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer... the authorities are God’s servants...”) was read in the same way. Similarly the resistance the early church showed to the governing authorities,

typified by the apostles' words in Acts 5.29, "We must obey God rather than men", further underlined the limitations upon temporal power.

Moreover, behind the apostles' teaching on the nature extent of political authority (1 Peter 2 was as much quoted as Romans 13), there stood the example of Christ and, in particular, his life of *kenosis* or 'self-emptying'. The idea of *kenosis* derives from Philippians 2.7 which describes how Christ "made himself nothing,/ taking the very nature[a] of a servant,/being made in human likeness." This has been and is understood in different ways, relating to what abilities or qualities Christ divested himself of when he became incarnate. In terms of governance it is interpreted in the light of statements like that which Christ made to his disciples in Mark 9.35: "if anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." Christ, as the example of what a human being should look like, empties himself of power or deploys it through service rather than domination. That is the example to which humans should aspire. Although there is no sense in scripture that governing authorities should therefore relinquish their capacity to govern – governing authorities have a specific call to govern – this idea of political 'kenosis' does further emphasise the need for governance to be for the good of the 'other', in particular the weak 'other'.

Overall, the idea of limited and localised governance remained a current within Christian political thought and played an important role in both the Protestant tradition, through the idea of self-governing congregations, and the Catholic one, through the idea of subsidiarity. This was first articulated in Pope Pius XI's encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno: On Reconstruction of the Social Order* in 1931, which asserted the "most weighty principle" that:

*Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them.<sup>41</sup>*

This principle was further applied to international relations in Pope John XXIII's 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, which argued that the same principle of subsidiarity that governs the relations between public authorities and individuals, families and intermediate societies in a single State, "must also apply to the relations between the public authority of the world community and the public authorities of each political community." Thus, no "universal authority" should attempt to limit the sphere of action of the public authority of an individual

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<sup>41</sup> Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno: On Reconstruction of the Social Order* (1931) #79.

State, or “to arrogate any of their functions to itself.” Rather, its “essential purpose” should be “to create world conditions in which the public authorities of each nation, its citizens and intermediate groups, can carry out their tasks, fulfil their duties and claim their rights with greater security.”<sup>42</sup>

This emphasis on subsidiarity is part of the broader objective of recognising that human flourishing can only be achieved if humans have some sense of meaningful control over their own affairs, something that is lost when those political decisions that affect the life of an individual or community are made solely at a distance. In this way, it is part of the idea of human flourishing that we see in embryo in Paul’s advice about “doing something useful with [your] own hands, that [you] may have something to share with those in need.” Although this has a more obvious relevance to economic affairs (see below), there is a concomitant point relating to governance, specifically that for humans to flourish they require a sense of having ‘a place at the table’, of having a say in the debate of their lives. Thus, in the words of *Pacem in Terris*, “the chief concern of civil authorities must...be to ensure that these [personal] rights are acknowledged, respected, coordinated with other rights, defended and promoted, so that in this way each one may more easily carry out his duties.”<sup>43</sup>

## ***Economics***

The close links between political and economic thinking mean that there are strong parallels between the implications of a Christian vision of human flourishing on governance and on economic thinking.

Israel’s corporate life was, as we have seen, suffused with exhortations to protect, help, support and give justice to the poor. Just as the *imago dei* is tied up with the relational responsibilities that come with being God’s vice-regents on earth, so Israel’s identity and ability to flourish as God’s people was tied up with the way in which it discharged (or failed to discharge) those responsibilities.

And as with the nation’s complex, multipolar structure, so its economic thinking did not simply rest on entreaties towards individual generosity. A family’s economic rights and stability were safeguarded by law. Assets such as millstones were not to be mortgaged “because that would be taking a man’s livelihood.” (Deuteronomy 24. 6) The laws

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<sup>42</sup> Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* (1963), #140-41.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, #60.

concerning the release of debt, the restoration of the debtor and the ban on interest were intended to preserve the financial self-sufficiency and integrity of the family unit, so that “each one... [can] return to his family property and each to his own clan.” (Leviticus 25.10)

At the same time, the family had economic obligations, such as leaving the corners of their fields unharvested for the poor and the weak, paying hired labourers fairly and promptly and being under obligation to allow hungry travellers the right to eat the produce of a field. (Deuteronomy 24: 17, 19-22; 26:11-12; 23:24-25) Economic activity was oriented not to maximising profits but towards serving a wider good, in particular the good of the those who were less able to secure their own good. It was an economy shaped by the demands of generosity, or, to borrow the words of *Caritas in Veritate*, a “composite” economic system “which does not exclude profit, but instead considers it a means for achieving human and social ends.”<sup>44</sup>

Such specific economic laws were set in a context of carefully distributed and recorded land ownership, land ownership being all but synonymous with economic security and well-being in pre-industrial societies. Unlike many contemporary nations, Old Testament Israel did not have a system whereby the king owned the land either for his benefit or (theoretically) on behalf of his subjects. Rather, the extensive land lists of Numbers 26 and 34 and Joshua 13-19 set out a society where there was equitable division of resources between the people, “according to their clans”, and enshrined the fundamental principle that every household had its part in the national inheritance. It was just such a principle that was exemplified in the prophet Micah’s vision of the last days, where “every man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree.” (Micah 4.4)

Because market economies, such as those assumed and sometimes articulated in Old Testament Law, naturally tend towards inequality, the law did not stop at the principle of equity of tenancy, however. Instead, it legislated for those who, for whatever reason, had become dispossessed. Slaves, for example, were protected from the exploitation that might arise from their landlessness. Their terms of service and release were clearly laid down. They were given the opportunity for freedom after six years should they want it. (Exodus 21.1-6) They were also entitled, like their ‘employers’, to enjoy Sabbath rest as well as all the benefits of the great festivals and cultic occasions which added several days’ break from work throughout the agricultural year. (Deuteronomy 16.11, 14)

Perhaps most strikingly, the Jubilee laws of Leviticus 25, to which we shall return below, dictated that every fiftieth year was to be a Sabbath year in which the usual Sabbath

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<sup>44</sup> *Caritas in Veritate*, op cit. #46.

regulations about rest applied but were accompanied by a universal return to ancestral property. Land was to be bought and sold with the Jubilee in mind so that transactions would be based on the number of years left before the next Jubilee, meaning that what was being sold was not the land itself but only the 'usufruct', the expected yield of the land until the next Jubilee.

By taking the land off the market as a commodity, the Jubilee laws intended to check excessive growth and prevent the amassing of huge private estates. They anchored the Israelites to their founding principles of equity of access and acted, in theory at least, as an antidote to the tendency towards economic imbalance. It was because this principle of land equity was so central to the foundation and mission of Israel that the prohibition against moving boundary stones could be so severe (see Deuteronomy 19.14, 27.17, and Hosea 5.10). To encroach on one's neighbour's property was not simply 'unfair'. It was to strike at the very heart of who Israel was.

The guiding light for such economic commands appears not to have been strict economic equality. There was no clear demand for economic uniformity among the people of God. Nor does it seem to be the more modern idea of economic freedom, meaning that the goal of economic policy must be to enable an individual or even a family to choose its own ends. A degree of equality and of freedom was clearly important and implicit in the commands, but the objective seems to have been *participation*: an economic system which enables all to participate in the common life in a way that protects and enhances their dignity.<sup>45</sup>

This has a number of implications for our modern attitudes to economic policy, two of which might be mentioned. The first relates to the economic goals of contemporary society, which have been spelled out in Catholic social teaching.

Just as we should not make an idol of the state, falsely crediting it with omni-competence, so we should not make an idol of the market, assuming that all its outcomes, provided they are arrived at from positions of knowledge and consent, are necessarily just. In the words of Pope John Paul II's 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, "the market [should] be

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<sup>45</sup> Thus even slavery, ubiquitous in the ancient world and, to the modern mind, utterly inimical to any idea of economic agency and human dignity, had a distinct twist to it. Israelite slaves, unlike slaves in contemporary societies, had certain rights, such as to be released after six years of labour, or at the next Jubilee year, and the right to run away. They could not be considered merely as someone else's property and could not be passed on through generations, unless they so wished. "This is not to suggest that life was always comfortable for the Israelite...or to sanitize the brutality of some employers of this labour, but it is to make a sharp distinction between categories of domestic contract." (Schluter et al, *Jubilee Manifesto*, pp. 193-95). In many ways, bonded labour is a more appropriate translation than slavery, with its connotations of Romano-Greek oppression and the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

appropriately controlled by the forces of society and by the State, so as to guarantee that the basic needs of the whole of society are satisfied.”<sup>46</sup>

Catholic Social Teaching maintains the same positive attitude to productive economic activity that was seen in Israel’s corporate life, contending that it should be “considered and undertaken as a grateful response to the vocation which God holds out for each person.”<sup>47</sup> However, it insists that “economic activity and material progress must be placed at the service of man and society,” being shaped by the key principle of “the universal destination of goods.”

“The universal destination of goods” is, in a sense, where the fundamental CST principle the Common Good – “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment” – is converted into hard economic currency. It does not necessitate common ownership but rather that economic activity must be ordered to the end in which “each person [has] access to the level of well-being necessary for his full development.”<sup>48</sup>

CST underlines how the principle of subsidiarity applies to this question of economic activity just as much as it does within political thinking. According to the 1986 pastoral letter from the U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, subsidiarity does not mean that “the government that governs least, governs best,” whether in political or economic terms. Rather, a good government is one that “truly ‘helps’ other social groups contribute to the common good by directing, urging, restraining, and regulating economic activity as ‘the occasion requires and necessity demands’.”<sup>49</sup>

This understanding of economic activity can result in a creative tension. On the one hand, “the freedom of the person in economic matters [is] a fundamental value and an inalienable right.”<sup>50</sup> On the other, “economic freedom is only one element of human freedom”:

*When it becomes autonomous, when man is seen more as a producer or consumer of goods than as a subject who produces and consumes in order to live, then economic freedom loses its necessary relationship to the human person and ends up by alienating and oppressing him.*<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, #35  
[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_01051991\\_centesimus-annus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus_en.html).

<sup>47</sup> *Compendium*, op cit. #326.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, #172.

<sup>49</sup> *Economic Justice for All*, #124.

<sup>50</sup> *Compendium*, op cit. #336.

<sup>51</sup> John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, op cit. #48.

That recognised, there is no effective difference between this tension and the tension inherent in the Christian understanding of governance discussed above. Economic thinking is faced with a conflict between economic freedom, on the one hand, and the need to ensure the economic ability of all to participate in and contribute to the common good on the other, in the same way as governance is faced with a conflict between the localized agency implicit in the principle of subsidiarity and the “universal” perspective and vision demanded by complex the global problems of poverty and climate change.

The second implication for our modern attitudes to economic policy lies in our attitude to work. We have already noted how productivity and creativity are key elements within the *imago dei* and how Paul accorded them importance in the lives of those who chose to re-appropriate that image by putting on their new selves, “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” (Ephesians 4.23)

Accordingly, Catholic Social Teaching places a significant emphasis on our identity as “workers”, describing work as “part of the original state of man”<sup>52</sup> and “an integral part of the human condition”<sup>53</sup>. It holds “a place of honour” as “a source of...the conditions for a decent life...an effective instrument against poverty,” and a necessary condition of “maintain[ing] a family,... hav[ing] a right to property, [and] to contribut[ing] to the common good of the human family.”<sup>54</sup>

Work has both objective and subjective dimensions. The former is linked to the creation mandate of “exercis[ing] dominion over the earth”, whereas the latter is connected to the vocation and dignity of the human person. Accordingly, unemployment is a “real social disaster”,<sup>55</sup> and “full employment...a mandatory objective for every economic system oriented towards justice and the common good.”<sup>56</sup>

This high opinion does not mean we should make an idol of work, still less ignore the Sabbath regulations (to which we shall return below). “The memory and the experience of the Sabbath constitute a barrier against becoming slaves to work... freeing people from the antisocial degeneration of human work.”<sup>57</sup> It does, however, orient us towards an economic system that strives for the participation of all in working life, just as it strives to satisfy “the basic needs of the whole of society.” In specific terms this leads to the advocacy of certain workers rights “in the hope that they will be recognized in juridical systems”, among which

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<sup>52</sup> *Compendium*, op cit. #256.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, #264.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, #256-57, #287.

<sup>55</sup> John Paul II, *Laborem exercens*, #18.

<sup>56</sup> *Compendium*, op cit. #288.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, #257.

are the right to a just wage, the right to rest, the right “to a working environment and to manufacturing processes which are not harmful to the workers’ physical health or to their moral integrity”, the right “to appropriate subsidies that are necessary for the subsistence of unemployed workers and their families”, the right “to a pension and to insurance for old age, sickness, and in case of work-related accidents”, the right “to social security connected with maternity”, and the right “to assemble and form associations.”<sup>58</sup> It also means arguing that workers should “participate in ownership, management and profits”, claiming that “on the basis of his work each person is fully entitled to consider himself a part-owner of the great workbench where he is working with everyone else.”<sup>59</sup>

More generally, it means structuring an economic system and the broader culture in which it is situated in such a way as to ensure that the innate productivity and creativity of all humans and their capacity to contribute to society is recognised and respected.

### ***Environment***

The absence of direct environmental commands in both Old and New Testaments might suggest there is something of a problem in rooting any environmental response in biblical theology. It is certainly true that the primary biblical location for environmental thinking lies in ideas relating to the shared and unique human characteristics outlined above, rather than to any specific laws such as are comparable to Israel’s multipolar political structure or the economic and territorial responsibilities of the people.

That noted, the teaching on the Sabbath and the Jubilee do comprise a significant and serious contribution to environmental thinking, placing a crucial emphasis on the ideas of limits, sufficiency, and fruitfulness.

Part of human dominion involves knowing when enough is enough, a point that emerges with particular clarity in the biblical understanding of the Sabbath. It is the Sabbath day, not the sixth day on which humanity is created, that is the crown of creation, and it is this pattern of creation that is explicitly cited in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20.8-11). The way in which the Sabbath rhythm of work and rest is treated as foundational for Israel’s communal life (cf. Exodus 23.10-13, 31.12-17, 35.1-3; Leviticus 19.3, 19.30, 23.3, 23.15-32; Leviticus 25-26; Deuteronomy 5.12-15) further emphasises this point, and underlines the fact that full human flourishing cannot be sought through ceaseless activity. This has obvious

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, #301.

<sup>59</sup> *Laborem exercens*, op cit. #14.

implications for economic and employment life, as mentioned above, but the Sabbath and, more especially, the Jubilee have profound implications for how we treat our shared environment.

The Hebrew understanding of creation was one of abundance and sharing. “God’s economy is not an economy of scarcity but an economy of plenty.”<sup>60</sup> “I have come that they might have life and that they might have it more abundantly,” Christ says in John 10.10.

Creation is repeatedly affirmed as good in the creation narrative. It is one in which, as the Psalmist writes, God himself delights. (Psalm 104.14-15) The land in which God delivers his people is described in lavish terms in Deuteronomy 8.7-9. Israel’s corporate life and their relationship to God are explicitly connected with this abundance: ‘Be careful to obey [these decrees and commands] so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey.’ (Deuteronomy 6:3) The link between creation, law and blessing emphasises the fact that this abundance is not simply a resource to be owned and used as we see fit. Rather, it is a gift to be appreciated, tended and preserved. Humans are called to ‘farm’ creation rather than ‘mine’ it.

This point is so important that it forms one of the central structural features of Israel’s corporate life. The importance of Sabbath rest extended beyond employment conditions. A day of rest was mandatory not just on employer and employee but also on working animals and the land itself. The law was intended to provide rest for all so that all “may be refreshed”. It was also used as an opportunity for the poor to take from the fallow fields what they could and even for wild animals to take what the poor left. In this way the land was both a beneficiary of God’s justice (in that it wasn’t to be exhausted) and a stage for it. The Sabbath laws were a reminder to Israel that “cessation from frantic activity will not cause the world to disintegrate or society to collapse.”<sup>61</sup>

Beyond the Sabbath, the Jubilee legislation, in which all debts were cancelled and people returned to their ancestral lands every fifty years, had enormous environmental implications. In the first instance, in the midst of the Jubilee legislation in Leviticus chapter 25, God tells his people, “the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants.” (Leviticus 25:23) For a people that was only now being delivered from slavery and wilderness, this may have been somewhat dispiriting. It underlined, in the most concrete way, the idea that creation is a gift. Even the Promised Land was not theirs.

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<sup>60</sup> Jean Bethke Elshtain, ‘Three Meditations on Human Flourishing’, Yale University discussion paper: <http://www.yale.edu/faith/downloads/Jean%20Bethke%20Elshtain%20-%20God's%20Power%20and%20Human%20Flourishing%202008.pdf>

<sup>61</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Augsburg Fortress, 1986) pp. 53-4.

This concept formed the basis for the Jubilee legislation which allowed Israel (at least in theory) to practice a market economy without sliding into the extreme and permanent levels of inequality that are so often a feature of market economies. The manner in which land and wealth are largely synonymous in agricultural societies points towards an economic reading of the Jubilee, but it should not obscure the environmental implications. Jubilee ensured (relative) income equality by ensuring (relative) environmental equality or, put another way, by ensuring that everyone had equitable access to shared environmental resources.

We have only recently begun to appreciate fully the value of those shared environmental resources, which are not simply limited to fossil or mineral resources (with which we *are* familiar) but also, crucially, the natural systems and sinks that regulate and ‘clean’ our shared environment.<sup>62</sup> Jubilee legislation orients us towards a system in which *all* may partake fairly and equitably in the use and preservation of *all* environmental goods – systems and sinks as well as sources – just as its economic interpretation points towards a system in which none is permanently disenfranchised and all have their “basic needs” satisfied so as to enable them to participate fully in our common life.

One other prominent feature of Israel’s corporate life bears relevance to our environmental (and indeed political and economic) thinking: the idea of the covenant. Covenants appear in various different forms and circumstances throughout the biblical narrative and one must be cautious if generalising about them. The underlying concept of the covenant, however, is based on fidelity, trust, mutuality, and commitment.

The root of the Hebrew word for covenant, *berit*, suggests a ‘bond’ or ‘fetter’, and that of the corresponding Greek word, *syntheke*, similarly implies ‘binding or putting together’. Both of these words give an indication that the principle of covenant involves a commitment to persevere with a relationship when difficulties occur and even when trust is betrayed.

Covenants differ from contracts in that they are open rather than closed. Whereas both establish mutual obligations and privileges for the parties involved, contracts define responsibilities and rights that are specific and temporary. Failure to discharge the relevant duties usually leads to the dissolution of the contract. Covenants, on the other hand, encourage attitudes rather than define actions. They describe rather than prescribe duties and are marked more by a shared vision and purpose than a detailed list of conditions.

Covenants can share with contracts recognition of the need for conditions and restrictions, and for discipline and correction. The Mosaic covenant, for example, was conditional, its

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<sup>62</sup> See the environmental paper in this series.

conditions and consequences set out in the book of Deuteronomy, and its endurance depending on the people's response. Those conditions should not, however, obscure for us what the idea of the covenant has to say to us today. It suggests that any serious attempt to advance human flourishing needs to show commitment and to be marked by an attitude of trust rather than scepticism. It also reminds us that such commitment needs to be long-rather than short-termist and to be marked by patience and perseverance.

This is critically important when dealing with environmental issues, where changes are slow and human responses need to be patient and sustained. Electoral cycles of four to five years, and news cycles of four to five hours are ill-suited to policies that demand decades of determined action in response to environmental changes that can last centuries. When dealing with environmental action, time horizons need to be lengthened and a sense of corporate identity and responsibility that transcends the immediate, limited and conditional contract between knowing agents fostered.

Despite the environmental framework of the Jubilee legislation, and the manner in which the Jubilee remained a feature of Christian thinking through the centuries, the Christian church came to environmental ethics comparatively late and it is only over recent years that there has grown up a substantial body of thinking on the whole area of Christian environmental ethics. Nevertheless, the body of thinking that now exists echoes and enforces many of the examples outlined above. Three ideas are particularly worth emphasising.

First, there is the idea of the interconnectedness of all living things, which is tied up with the fact that they cannot be reduced to the economic utility. As Pope John Paul II wrote in his 1987 encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, we “cannot use with impunity the different categories of beings, whether living or inanimate...according to one's own economic needs.” Rather, we need to take into account “the nature of each being and of its mutual connection in an ordered system.”<sup>63</sup>

Second, there is the idea of limits and, linked to that, our responsibility to unborn generations. “Using [natural resources] as if they were inexhaustible, with absolute dominion, seriously endangers their availability not only for the present generation but above all for generations to come.”<sup>64</sup> The fact that we cannot sign a contract with “generations to come” does not excuse us from our moral responsibility towards them, any more than the inability of other creatures to enter into a contract absolves us from our moral duties to the

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<sup>63</sup> *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) #34.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

environment. “Projects for integral human development cannot ignore coming generations, but need to be marked by solidarity and inter-generational justice.”<sup>65</sup>

Third, and most emphatically there is the idea that the environment is a crucial element within the common good. Not only are we connected to the rest of creation and with future generations in such a way as to place upon us important moral responsibilities, but we are called to ensure that all environmental resources are equitably distributed. “All people have...the right to find in the world what is necessary for them... All other rights, whatever they are, including property rights and the right of free trade must be subordinated to this norm”.<sup>66</sup> Humans cannot flourish otherwise.

Overall, much Christian environmental thinking can be summarized in the concept of ‘fruitfulness’. Agricultural metaphors like this abound in both Old and New Testaments (see, for example, Genesis 1.22, 9.1, 49.22; Isaiah 5.7, 27.2; Jeremiah 23.2; Hosea 10.1; Amos 9.15; Matthew 3.8-10, 21.33-46; Luke 6.43-45; John 15.1-17; Romans 7.4-5; Galatians 5.22; Philippians 1.22) and carry with them implications that non-agricultural readers are sometimes liable to miss. Ensuring fruitfulness demands hard work (it doesn’t happen by accident) and hard decisions (pruning can be painful). It requires a form of partnership in which the gardener works *with* rather than instead of the raw materials. It requires long-term planning and perseverance. It allows, indeed it relies on the gardener expecting a yield, or profit, from her labour, but depends on that yield being compatible with the requirements of future harvests and, ultimately, with the productivity of the land itself. Overworking the land exhausts it and effectively constitutes theft from later generations, our neighbours in time. In essence, the idea of fruitfulness presents us with a(n arguably richer) biblical category that is equivalent to our modern idea of sustainability. A Christian vision of human flourishing will see the idea of ‘being fruitful’ as a guide for our environmental thinking and action.

### **In summary**

In his book *Against the Heretics*, written around 185AD, the church father Irenaeus of Lyons wrote, “Gloria Dei vivens homo”: “the Glory of God is man fully alive”. Elliptical and enigmatic as the statement is, it captures something close to the heart of the Christian concept of human flourishing.

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<sup>65</sup> *Caritas in Veritate*, op cit. #48.

<sup>66</sup> *Populorum Progressio*, #22.

The human nature revealed to us in scripture and theological reflection is markedly different to that dominant today in which humans are fundamentally choice-making beings. In the Christian view, humans are created, material, dependent, interconnected beings. They are made to be creative, productive, responsible *generous* vice-regents of creation. They are (intended to be) “all members of one body”, (Ephesians 4.25), to relate to one another in such a way as will “build others up according to their needs.” (Ephesians 4.29)

To flourish as a human being means recognising and respecting these dimensions: enabling all to have a meaningful say in the direction in which their lives travel; affording opportunities for all to be creative, productive and generous; ensuring that all share in the use of and care for our shared natural resources; making it possible for all to contribute to our common fellowship.

The word in scripture that comes closest to capturing this idea is *shalom*, a term variously defined as “wholeness, well-being, vigour and vitality in all dimensions of human life,... pleasure and happiness, peace and well-being... overtones of justice... to live appropriately and to have harmony and balance in every aspect of one’s life and relationships.”<sup>67</sup>

The fact that there is no comparable word in English and we have of late been forced to use the word “well-being” may be significant. Whether it is or not, a Christian concept of human flourishing is one that seeks “the Glory of God” by working towards the *shalom* of his creation.

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<sup>67</sup> See *Health: The Strength to be Human*, ed. Andrew Fergusson (Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press, 1993) and *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, ed. David John Atkinson, David Field, Arthur Frank Holmes, Oliver O'Donovan (IVP, 1995) p. 25.