

Is growth good?

Toward a Christian ethical interrogation of a dominant paradigm

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What are we talking about?

Is growth good? This question has recently come to the fore in Australian political discussion. There is more to it than meets the eye.

The most salient recent discussion has been around population growth, as Prime Minister Gillard hosed down her predecessor's optimism about a 'Big Australia', a place with a 2050 population two-thirds greater than today. The national airing of *Dick Smith's Population Puzzle*, an opinion piece by the retired entrepreneur followed by a live-to-air panel discussion, was a clarion call for population stabilisation. Our growing population is, according to Smith, 'forcing up property prices, clogging our roads, and exhausting our countryside.' Similarly, the eminent Monash University population researcher Professor Bob Birrell (who also appeared in Smith's film) has launched a stinging attack on Sydney's and Melbourne's 'parasite' economies. These huge conurbations gobble up immigrants to buoy their regional economies, but are massively cross-subsidised by the resource-rich

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States. Yet Australia's unprecedented recent intakes of around 270,000 per annum are merely a cheap strategy for economic growth in these cities. It does not translate proportionally per capita into economic prosperity, productivity growth, infrastructure planning or food security, and compromises any hope of greenhouse gas emission reduction.¹

A related discussion questions our cultural disposition toward macroeconomic growth itself. Macroeconomic policy assumes the necessity of an ever-growing GDP. Clive Hamilton challenged this orthodoxy in *Growth Fetish* (2003), and in the more personal and existential *Affluenza* (2005).² 'Growth not only fails to make people contented; it destroys many of the things that do. Growth fosters empty consumerism, degrades the natural environment, weakens social cohesion and corrodes character,' complains Hamilton.³ More recently, UK academic Tim Jackson appeared at Melbourne's 2010 Deakin Lectures to promote the thesis of his book, *Prosperity Without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet*.⁴ Jackson acknowledges that he is an heir to the minority report against economic growth that began at least as far back as Robert Malthus' *Essay on Population* (1798).⁵ I will return below to some aspects of his thesis.

So to ask 'is growth good?' is at least to ask two related questions. Even a casual observer can tell that population growth and macroeconomic growth stand in recursive relationship, like chicken to egg. A growing economy services a growing population, and a growing population services the growth economy. To try to decide whether growth is good is to continually switch our attention, like watchers at a tennis match. Each issue confounds our thought about the other. Witness Paul Kelly's declaration that the givens of economic growth simply define the necessity of population growth:

[T]he drivers of a high population growth rate are embedded. ... ANU demographer Peter McDonald identifies the drivers as the new resources boom, ambitious infrastructure projects and service sector demands from rising national income. 'The key factor behind immigration is future labour demand and for this reason Australia will need a sustained intake for many years to come,' McDonald says.⁶

We also find that debate about growth comes pre-digested as a standard left-right divide. The commendatory blurbs introducing *Growth Fetish* cheekily include this less laudatory response: 'Clive Hamilton's garbage is

just silly, dangerous, left-wing crap' (Michael Egan). To question growth is to be left-leaning; to applaud it is a badge of the right. Each Christian enters this discussion with a predisposition to the left or to the right; but Christian theology does not exist to baptise our political dispositions. Hard though it may be, Christians try to determine the merits on both sides of any difficult argument, and even though most of us will not have the technical expertise to judge between the competing accounts of macroeconomic theory at stake, there is an aspect to the question 'is growth good?' with which every Christian may engage.

For at its deepest level, the question 'is growth good?' is normative. It addresses our accounts of what constitutes a society's common good. It is not just a matter of arbitration over whether the left or the right has the best economic theory. An easy conceit is that economics dispassionately observes and describes our transactions, an activity that is separate from our normative judgments about these activities. Yet the conversation about growth often includes normative judgments, as when Jackson highlights the normative language of the economists who describe a less productive economy as 'dismal' in comparison to another that is 'forging ahead'.⁷ This body of thought also fails to make normative judgments that we usually expect of people: 'Economics – and macro-economics in particular – is ecologically illiterate.'⁸

Christian economic commentary as ethical interrogation

The Australian Christian economist Paul Oslington is 'increasingly sceptical about the project of building a distinctively Christian economics; a task that he thinks might ignore what Reformed theology called God's 'common grace', and which may be simply a manifestation of identity politics.'⁹ Contrary to several attempts to build an overtly Christian economics, there is no such free-standing system by which we may judge the debate about growth. But Oslington finds it 'entirely possible and sensible' to distinguish conventional economics from Christians ethics, and for Christian ethics to ask about how economics is done.¹⁰ Oslington's point suggests that whether or not we are economists, Christians may 'audit' and interrogate economic debate to elucidate its hidden moral undertows. This 'auditing' does not have to denigrate the economic task *per se*.

As John E Stapleford puts it, 'the technical structure of mainstream market economics ... has unquestioningly proven its worth as a body of

knowledge.' He uses a 'minimal outline' of broad principles gleaned from Scripture to test economic practice.¹¹ Andrew Hartropp's more extensive biblical investigation yields a conception of 'economic justice' that contains four main elements.¹² These two recent treatments offer instructive benchmarks for a Christian interrogation of economic discussion and praxis. I will presume to paraphrase and combine these Scripturally-derived elements.

According to these treatments, an economically just society will seek to be socially inclusive, and committed to extending participation in God's material blessing to all. Correlatively, it will respond to the socially excluded by attending to those in economic deprivation. Procedurally, it will attend to the quality of relationships, expressed in thick practices of commutative justice, and it will also seek for the appropriate treatment of individual actors according to a thick conception of the dignity of each person. It will avoid materialistic idolatry; it will promote work according to each of our capabilities; and collectively, it will enact good 'stewardship' of God's creation. (However I concur with the resistance to the language of 'stewardship' expressed by University of Aberdeen theological ethicist Dr Brian Brock. He finds this term to be 'an unreflective divinisation of economic efficiency by the bourgeois and wealthy.'¹³ This portmanteau word also masks serious disagreements about the extent to which the natural order should be consumed, and elides what Australian thinker Richard Denniss reasonably expects: 'a genuine debate about what sustainable means.'¹⁴)

Of course it is easy to critique these 'benchmarks' for their abstractness. They do not give specific economic descriptions; they require difficult debate and judgment at key points (for example, 'justice', 'inclusion', 'stewardship'); and defenders of every economic system could mount claims that their system properly defends each broad principle.¹⁵ But those criticisms may only be an artefact of the brevity with which they have been stated here. Conceived as a set of 'channel markers', they can help us to discern when a set of economic practices has strayed from the common good.

I am intrigued by the extent to which these 'channel markers' cohere with the social vision of the Anglican theologian, Oliver O'Donovan. I will presume to distil some aspects of his sweeping corpus.¹⁶ For O'Donovan, human community is grounded in *creaturely cohabitation*. Since our humanity is creaturely, our reliance upon the natural world is prior to our care for it and uses of it. ('Sustainability' is an appropriate expression of this truth.) *Sociality* is inherent to us: we are born, grow and live in relationships

of reliance upon others. (So there is no such thing as a ‘pre-social’ or ‘pre-political’ individual, and ‘social contact’ theories are basically fables.) Sociality is expressed in at least four ways. We are *equal*: there are no natural slaves or lords. Humans are *partners* (not mere individuals). We have *affinities*: we congregate by families, communities, nations and cultures, which may properly be defended (as when we point to the good of family, or assist a group to continue in its language). But affinity groups also engage in *reciprocity*: homes, communities and nations may interact in networks, whilst also maintaining their integrity. (‘Xenophilia is commanded us: the neighbour whom we are to love is the foreigner whom we encounter on the road.’¹⁷)

A society consists in its *communications*, a term not restricted to verbal communication. We ‘communicate’ whenever we take up any good gift, make it ‘meaningful’ to another, and share it. Our communications sum together to become our *culture*. When people are well-embedded in a thick set of ‘communications’, justice is expressed commutatively and attributively, and consists in giving what is due. But when people have fallen out of ‘communications’ (for example, on brink of death, through some kind of economic exclusion, or before the law), justice consists in the application of strict equality. *Markets* are venues where people meet to ‘communicate’. That is, they are venues for organised sharing, but are also susceptible to power imbalances and distortions that diminish sharing and create exclusion. All our acts of *consumption and ownership* are ‘waypoints’, not ‘endpoints’: we possess things, finally in order to communicate them one way or another.

On this view, the common good requires constant, ongoing discernment, and a *government* does well when it recognises, upholds, promotes and maintains the ‘common good’ in some package of the factors above, while also knowing the limits of its proper authority. But societies also coalesce around *common objects of love*, some of which are right and proper, others of which are contestable. Whether or not a government can affect these ‘common objects of love’ can never be known in advance.

Although O’Donovan studiously avoids the term, this vision of society has affinities to communitarian political philosophy. Admittedly, any invocation of labels such as ‘communitarian’ as opposed to ‘liberal’ or ‘conservative’ can also bog down in definitional dispute. But a social vision such as O’Donovan’s tries to give some specificity to the complexity of social relations, and to factors that can easily become overlooked in some applications of economic theory. Stephen A Marglin brilliantly exposes how, in

contrast, modern economic thought can distort our thought about many of these elementary basics. For example, economic thought does not merely describe the operation of competition. According to Marglin, it actually causes rivalry. Rivalry has always been inherent to human social relations; but the logic of macroeconomics has now corralled us into expressing social rivalry *mainly* through the economic sphere. It has also enabled 'individualism [to] become the dominant map of social organisation.'¹⁸ So despite our magnificent productivity, abundance is an impossible goal. Unbounded wants create a miasma of scarcity around all we see and do. Growth chases scarcity, but 'like the mechanical rabbit at the dog races, Scarcity has always managed to stay comfortably ahead of its pursuer.'¹⁹

But I sneak ahead of myself to introduce Marglin's polemic at this point. For the moment, the main point to note is that the Christian attempt to answer whether growth is good is primarily an exercise in ethical enquiry. If we discover that less growth is good, only other economists can seriously interrogate whether low-growth proposals could work.

The first claim against growth: unsustainability

The first moral claim against growth is that although growth creates wealth and produces abundance, its proponents seem to presume that it is *ecologically* limitless, which it is not.

Macroeconomic theory of the past two hundred and fifty years is distinctive in its move from the conception of a 'zero-sum game' to the conceptualisation of wealth creation. For the uninitiated, a zero-sum game refers to the kind of activity where everyone reduces a fixed pool of resources, while nothing is added (the 'zero-sum').²⁰ The period known as mercantilism is often regarded as such a 'game', when the great powers simply sought to corner markets around the globe to take what they could so that another power could not. But once people realised that labour adds value to commodities, *voilà*: wealth is 'created', and the possibilities for growth seemed limitless.

Ecologically aware economists effectively assert that humanity's use of the planet is the ultimate zero-sum game. Inputs that help to create wealth are taken (such as fossil fuels, metal ores or waste disposal capacity) and nothing is added. These free inputs are the real basis for wealth creation, not only labour productivity. But presumably, these inputs cannot continue forever. At some point, the party has to stop.

Jackson uses the 'Ehrlich equation' to tell us that 'the impact (I) of human activity is the product of three factors: the size of the population (P), its level of affluence (A) expressed as income per person, and a technology factor (T), which measures the impact associated with each dollar we spend.'²¹ The invocation of the controversial Paul Ehrlich may cause 'right-leaning' readers to growl; but this formula seems quite plausible. It also models an interrelation between population growth and macroeconomic growth, as mentioned above.

To paraphrase the equation, it simply observes that more natural resources are required (I) in order for more people (P) to become wealthier (A). Essentially, we burn more energy-dense fossil fuels and cut down more trees in order to grow more food, make more clothes, build more houses, and to beat more metal and plastic into interesting new shapes that we want. If the number of people (P) and their wealth (A) were held stable, then natural resource use would also become stable. (The remaining resources will last longer, but are still being exhausted.)

'Aha!', someone cries, 'not so. More *efficient* use of natural resources would result in *reduced* resource use.' Correct; this effect is represented by the 'technology factor' (T). Jackson agrees that this factor can reduce the impact on resources used. We like to imagine this effect reducing resource use almost to negligible levels.

So consider the ultra-smart city. Its housing would be smaller and energy-clever. It would deploy high levels of recycling, including water recycling. It would emphasise pedestrian, bicycle and mass transit. Active and passive solar energy would be harvested from every available square metre. Community gardening initiatives and farmers' markets would reduce food miles. Leisure would be less consumption-intensive and more communal: libraries, parks, pools and various personal services would replace malls and reduce shopping strips. In this smart city, the 'technology factor' would be reduced in hundreds of small increments, stabilising and eventually reducing resource consumption. This strategy for 'green growth' is known as the 'decoupling' of natural resources from growth. 'Relative decoupling' describes more efficient use of resources, while 'absolute decoupling' occurs in those activities that require negligible resources (For example, reading in an energy-efficient library).

The possibility of smart urbanisation and resource decoupling was conspicuously absent from *Dick Smith's Population Puzzle*. A housing

developer moaned that he needed more land grants. Smith moaned that we needed less people. The developer moaned that a collapse in the housing market would disrupt ten per cent of the Australian economy – all while both traipsed about cavernous, barn-like housing on massive blocks. Later, an elderly woman's plight and an absence of infrastructure planning were disingenuously used to denigrate medium- and high-density housing. But some version of higher density housing will surely be necessary for smart, resource-decoupling urban policy.

Yet in defence of the film, we should also observe its strongest moral point when it decried the skimming of skilled workers from poor countries, 'plundering poorer nations of the people they can least afford to lose, [which is] a hell of a lot easier, and cheaper, than training our own people.' This point may have been borrowed from Richard Denniss, who observes that 'rather than have a genuine debate about whether industry or government could be doing more to invest in the training of our young we are simply told there is no alternative but to import those skills from overseas.'²² In contrast, one route to a smart, more decoupled city is to foster the labour-intensive task of reskilling socially excluded Australians for better participation in the decoupled economy we are aiming for.

Can population and wealth continue to grow on the decoupled scenario? Jackson is obviously in favour of decoupling. But he extensively analyses whether decoupling can tweak and save the current macroeconomic growth paradigm, and finds that it cannot. It is beyond my competence to judge whether his conclusion is correct (although I certainly cannot fault it). But we will return to one major reason he offers for the failure of decoupling: that in our current social relations, and under the current macroeconomic preference for growth, every cent we save on, say, energy-efficient lighting gets spent on, say, an airline flight. We do so because it remains very important to most of us that we have status goods to enhance our social standing. Overall then, rates of decoupling have proven quite minimal.

The litany of environmental woes driving concern about the sustainability of growth has been recited well elsewhere.²³ Yet there remains an impasse between environmental optimists, such as climate-change sceptics, and pessimists. Personally, the optimists' outright rejection of all environmental concerns seems to me to evidence a level of scepticism that borders on mental illness. To be fair, though, we must concede that the epistemological task of summing up the planet's available abundance is quite daunting, and

that sceptical interrogations of green claims do perform a necessary role in public discourse.

But in discussions of growth, rejections of the unsustainability thesis do not usually consist in any counter-demonstration of ample resources. They are simply premised upon the absolute need for macroeconomic growth. Paul Kelly again serves as a case in point. In the context of the population debate he denigrates ‘the loopy “carrying capacity” concept’. ‘The idea that Australia could not “carry” 36 million people is absurd. Yet nobody doubts the ability of environmentalists to construct principles that make this seem untenable.’ But rather than challenging these principles, Kelly simply flips the argument back to economics: ‘What assumptions should be made about water or water pricing, or infrastructure and its pricing in such an exercise?’²⁴ Kelly simply intuitively understands environmental capaciousness, and his line of thought automatically returns to questions of pricing. His argument makes some price imperative the *independent* variable, with ‘carrying capacity’ dependent upon it.

Even if advocates of population stabilisation have seriously underestimated what is possible, the *concept* of carrying capacity is hardly ‘loopy’. It is simply a judgment based on rainfall patterns, rates of biodiversity loss, crop yield, carbon dioxide limits, and so on. The concept of ‘carrying capacity’ simply tries to take our creaturely cohabitation seriously, and treats our relationship with the natural order as the independent variable. (The concept of ‘carrying capacity’ also alludes to the land’s carriage of biodiversity – an example of the kind of good that economists regularly underplay when it cannot be made commensurable with their style of monetary evaluation.²⁵) There is nothing unreasonable in Denniss’s hope for ‘a genuine debate about what sustainable means.’²⁶ Yet ridicule such as Kelly’s kills such debate, in the name of economic growth, before the facts are even on the table.

Even if the climate change sceptics and the growth optimists turn out to be completely correct (which I entirely doubt), surely Christian ethics can simply assert *prima facie* the case for prudence. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, the risks suggested by environmentalists fall foul of several of the channel markers above, and will severely compromise the communal vision of society that those channel markers serve. Because there is any risk that we may be thieving from future generations; because future humanity may be crippled if we are careless; even simply because our neighbours today

are worried – these possibilities alone suffice to elicit serious consideration of any alternatives to growth.

The second claim against growth: inhumanity

The second moral claim against growth, made in various ways, is that it makes us inhuman. I use this odd term ‘inhuman’ to allude to a variety of complaints, ranging from claims that growth has failed to enhance happiness,²⁷ through to claims that growth actually creates scarcity, rivalry and the kinds of gross inequalities that destroy social relationships.²⁸ In other words, growth as we have known it is simply deleterious to other measures of human flourishing.

As a measure of wellbeing, GDP is a blunt instrument. This thought is not new. In John Ruskin’s nineteenth-century neologism, an economy produces ‘illth’ as well as wealth; but as a conventional measure of wellbeing, the GDP simply collapses these two into the one indicator. It adds the costs of defensive expenditures (such as the costs of cleaning up oil spills and car accidents) to more constructive costs, and fails adequately to reflect goods such as volunteer work, or evils such as chronic unemployment. In 1995, Clifford Cobb *et al.* delivered a clarion call to this effect in the US context:

When one considers the \$32 billion diet industry, the GDP becomes truly bizarre. It counts the food that people wish they didn’t eat, and then the billions they spend to lose the added pounds that result. The coronary bypass patient becomes almost a metaphor for the nation’s measure of progress: shovel in the fat, pay the consequences, add the two together, and the economy grows some more.²⁹

Against this absurdity Cobb and his colleagues proposed the development of a ‘Genuine Progress Indicator’ (GPI), where an array of factors, including the household and volunteer economy, crime and other defensive expenditures, distribution of income, resource depletion and habitat degradation, and loss of leisure were all either added to or subtracted from the index. In the Australian context, a similar initiative has been recently proposed. The Australian National Development Index (ANDI) will ‘develop new measures of equitable and sustainable wellbeing ... including environmental, social, economic, cultural and democratic dimensions of progress.’³⁰ It will be

modelled on the Canadian Index of Wellbeing Network, and reflects a general world-wide trend to better articulate measures of community wellbeing.

But Cobb and his colleagues were not unaware of the opposition they would face in this project:

Economists have couched their resistance to new indicators mainly in philosophical terms. A measure of national progress must be scientific and value-free, they say. Any attempt to assess how the economy actually affects people would involve too many assumptions and imputations, too many value judgments regarding what to include. Better to stay on the supposed terra firma of the GDP, which for all its faults has acquired an aura of hard-headed empirical science.³¹

In fact the key term, progress, is already an inherently moral and normative category. Cobb's detractors first camouflage the normativity of 'progress,' and then debar those living through 'progress' from articulating what constitutes it. In contrast, Cobb is basically proposing a return to the political task necessary for every society: a discernment of *the common good*. This notion has become a sticking point only in late modern liberal society, where to 'impose values' is tantamount to a crime against humanity. The conceit of a supposedly value-free GDP as our best measure of a supposedly non-normative 'progress' arises primarily from a failure of political will and judgment to advocate for the society's best.

Such a polity would frankly challenge the sentiments of US literature professor James B Twitchell, who thinks that consumerism simply makes 'a more democratic world, a more egalitarian world, and, I think, a more interesting world.'³² But in the absence of any attempt to specify a common good – as is inchoate in, say, an alternative social vision like O'Donovan's – this kind of brash individualism can simply shrug, and assert the primacy of individual autonomy.

In the way we live now, it is simply impossible to consume objects without consuming meaning. Meaning is pumped and drawn everywhere throughout the modern commercial world, into the farthest reaches of space and into the smallest divisions of time. Commercialism is the water we all swim

in, the air we breathe, our sunlight and shade. Currents of desire flow around objects like smoke in a wind tunnel.³³

Twitchell bespeaks a brazen *fin de siècle zeitgeist* that is now less fashionable. The use of consumption to imbibe meaning rings hollow after the cataclysm of 2008. But the social meaning of consumption, rooted in the need to so possess as to gain social standing above another, is well known and remains strong. Perhaps Twitchell even writes sardonically, or iconoclastically, to strip away our pious denials of the secondary social gains of our acts of consumption. Whatever his intention, he successfully gets at the inner motives that drive consumer economy.

Cooper *et al.* use conventional economic analysis to show that conspicuous consumption has an initial utility in social standing for the consumer, but results in a decline of average utility to the individual over time, simply because of the increased presence and innovation of status goods in the economy.³⁴ The authors present their findings as a kind of confirmation of the ancient wisdom of the Preacher of Ecclesiastes, for whom 'all toil and all skill in work come from one person's envy of another. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind' (Ecclesiastes 4:4, *NRSV*). Jackson thinks that the time has come to take such ancient wisdom seriously:

We ... have to find a way through the institutional and social constraints that lock us into a failing system. In particular, we need to identify opportunities for change within society – changes in values, changes in lifestyles, changes in social structure – that will free us from the damaging social logic of consumerism.³⁵

He highlights a human diagnosis spoken by the apostle John centuries before. We are each characterised by 'a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions' (1 John 2:16, in the racy *New Living Translation*). Humanity in every time and place experiences this kind of rampant desire.³⁶ But in our time and place, the style of desire is repackaged to drive economic growth. 'Growing approval of envy', observes historian of emotion Peter Stearns (citing five studies in support), 'has adjusted to the needs of a consumer economy.'³⁷

For the apostle Paul, the most dreadful judgment God could give was to abandon people to rampant desire (Romans 1:18–32). This passage

opens out to depict the full panoply of disordered human desire, including greed, envy, strife, deceit, ruthlessness and more. Our fights about sex in the passage distract us from Paul's main point: that systems of self-serving and self-justifying desire give us the society we deserve. In response to this condition, my own community of churches construes its task as evangelical and evangelistic – to proclaim that people have to admit the general disordering of our desires, and that through Christ, God forgives us when we ask for change. We are no longer then abandoned, as the Spirit reorders our affections toward others, toward God and toward proper creaturely cohabitation. This task seems more necessary than ever in an age full of 6.8 billion voracious human wills.

I recognise all the old animosities that well up when I attempt to commend this task to every church. But we could at least parley an agreement on one aspect of the evangelical project. In relation to economic growth, a church's public theology may or may not test policy proposals for a non-growth economy. But the churches' *primary* task remains what Jackson and others know to lie at the heart of the problem. For a society to find a new economic model, it must discover *new common objects of love*.

A social vision arising from the gospel, such as O'Donovan's (sketched above), needs to recapture our neighbours' imaginations, enabling them to long for something more than the rivalrous consumption that has been bequeathed them. The meaning delivered by this form of life seems so intense that it can power sixty or more years of consumer-driven economic growth. Yet John's estimate of the passing and transitory nature of the consumer's experience (1 John 2:17), or the Preacher's estimate of its breath-like 'vanity' (Ecclesiastes 4:4), is supported by just about every study of wellbeing that takes to the field. Despite our differences, Christian churches can join to help our neighbours toward a better way to be human together. We may enable our neighbours to search for 'common objects of love.' As Augustine puts it:

A people, we may say, is a gathered multitude of rational beings united by agreeing to share the things they love. ... The better the things, the better the people; the worse the things, the worse their agreement to share them.³⁸

O'Donovan continues:

Materialism, for Augustine, is the paradigm of lying love, attached to real goods and yet untrue, since it misconceives the significance of those goods within reality as a whole. A view of politics as a choice between economic systems for distributing material goods would strike Augustine as a choice between two roads to Hell.³⁹

We now begin to see the *gravitas* of Oslington's comment that the church possesses no 'Christian economics' by which to endorse or deny growth. Rather, churches exist to offer the power of renewed moral imagination. We can showcase what has been lost in the standard discourses about growth, and commend communally oriented economic praxis. We do so while knowing and saying that secular community 'has no ground of its own on which it may simply exist' and that it is only 'opened up to its fulfilment in God's love.'⁴⁰ It so happens that in our time and place, some of this task overlaps and agrees with some aspects of the low-growth proposals we are seeing.

'Sabbath economics'

When it comes to church comment on the economy, a final observation and caveat remains. Without seeking to induce guilt or shame, it is quite obvious that most Christians are as enmeshed in the growth economy as any other citizen. To critique or question it, then, will only succeed in sounding like the most facile moralism if it cannot be demonstrated that Christian communities are searching for something different. We may simply lay ourselves open to the quite proper *ad hominem* that our economic practices entirely conflict with our polemic against false love.

As US ethicist Stanley Hauerwas famously put it, 'the first social ethical task of the church is to be the church ... the church does not have a social ethic; the church is a social ethic.'⁴¹ What might it look like, to 'be the church', and to search for something different? The standard method has been for each local church community to gesture toward the possibility of a resource-decoupled society through energy-efficient lighting, solar panelling, car-pooling and so on. A few diehards might grow their own food, spend less, give more to charity, sell their cars and reduce their carbon footprint.

There is nothing wrong with these initiatives; I affirm and enact many of them myself. Yet we know that we each remain firmly embedded in the

givens of the growth economy, and are as dependent upon its inexorable formulae and supply chains as ever.

I have become intrigued, then, by a complementary proposal suggested by Ched Myers and US Presbyterian pastor Matthew Colwell. Their *Sabbath Economics: Household Practices* suggests that our households are embedded in seven areas of economic practice that are interlocked with each other and with our wider community. We have surplus capital to invest; we have negative capital (debt) to manage; we give; we care for the natural environment; we consume; we are in solidarity with others up and down various supply chains; and we move between work and Sabbath practices. Myers and Colwell invite households in churches to covenant with one another to challenge and change their practice in one of these areas each year. In this way, churches include various households with various levels of engagement and awareness of their economic practice. The approach acknowledges and brings some order to the complexity involved in differentiating ourselves from the macroeconomic orthodoxies that have formed us. It is also an approach that avoids meaningless idealistic statements about ‘what we should all be doing.’ It encourages freedom for people and families to slowly change as they are able.

The proponents of this approach do not imagine that it substitutes ‘for engaging wider political aspects of economic justice,’ but that it is ‘a complement to organising and advocacy’ as well as being necessary for ‘the long haul of faith development.’⁴²

Is growth good? I am not an economist, and cannot finally pronounce in favour of the proposed alternatives. But I am a Christian, and can seek to live an identity in Christ that is not necessarily formed by the macroeconomic orthodoxies of my time. I have reason to suspect that growth is not so good. I have reason to hope there may be different objects of love, and different ways of sharing our common life together. I can seek, with others, to find them.

Endnotes

1. As reported by Paul Sheehan, 'The Yarra Monster is killing us', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 August 2010, p. 9, <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/politics/the-yarra-monster-is-killing-us-20100822-13apt.html> (accessed 23 August 2010).
2. Clive Hamilton, *Growth Fetish*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest NSW, 2003; Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss, *Affluenza: when too much is never enough*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest NSW, 2005.
3. Hamilton, *Growth Fetish*, p. x.
4. Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet*, Earthscan, London, 2009. An earlier edition of this book is available at www.sd-commission.org.uk (accessed 15 August 2010).
5. Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth*, p. 6.
6. Paul Kelly, 'PM must be clear on population', *The Australian*, 7 July 2010, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/opinion/pm-must-be-clear-on-population/story-e6frg6zo-1225888688158> (accessed 15 August 2010).
7. Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth*, p. 95.
8. Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth*, p. 123.
9. Paul Oslington, 'Whither Christian economics?', p. 1, www.christian-economists.org.uk/DP003_Oslington.pdf (accessed 15 August 2010).
10. Oslington, 'Whither Christian economics?', p. 2.
11. John Stapleford, *Bulls, Bears and Golden Calves: Applying Christian Ethics in Economics*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 2002, p. 28 and ch. 1.
12. Andrew Hartropp, *What is Economic Justice? Biblical and Secular Perspectives Contrasted*, Paternoster, Milton Keynes, 2007, p. 102 and ch. 3.
13. Brian Brock, interview for *Wapenweld* magazine (www.wapenveldonline.nl); English draft dated 14 July 2010 supplied to the author by Dr Brock.
14. Richard Denniss, 'Banking on hasty growth', *The Age*, 22 July, 2010, <http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/banking-on-hasty-growth-20100721-10l2d.html> (accessed 15 August 2010).
15. For a serious recent attempt from the 'right', see Austin Hill and Scott Rae, *The Virtues of Capitalism: A Moral Case for Free Markets*, Northfield Publishing, Chicago, 2010. Although it seeks to vindicate capitalism against many of the 'channel markers' I have proposed, it completely fails to defend the environmental sustainability of the growth it espouses.

16. This 'distillate' arises from the following works *passim* : Oliver MT O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment: The Bampton Lectures, 2003*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2005; Oliver MT O'Donovan, *The Just War Revisited*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003; Oliver MT O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2002; Oliver MT O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996; from Robin Grove-White and Oliver O'Donovan, 'An Alternative Approach', in Robin Attfield and Katharine Dell, (eds), *Values, Conflict and the Environment*, Ian Ramsey Centre, Oxford, 1989, pp. 73–82.
17. O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, p. 268.
18. Stephen A Marglin, *The Dismal Science: How Thinking Like an Economist Undermines Community*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2008, p. 221.
19. Marglin, *The Dismal Science*, p. 216.
20. I have borrowed this helpful definition from Hill and Rae, *Virtues of Capitalism*, p. 64.
21. Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth*, p. 77.
22. Dr Richard Denniss, 'For the love of profits: Australia's skills shortage', *ABC The Drum Unleashed*, 28 July 2010, https://www.tai.org.au/file.php?file=/media_releases/For_the_love_of_profits.pdf (accessed 15 August 2010).
23. For example, John Langmore, *To Firmer Ground: Restoring Hope in Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2007, pp. 7–9; Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth*, pp. 9–13 and 222, as for endnote 25; Hamilton, *Growth Fetish*, 176–188 and chapter 7.
24. Kelly, 'PM must be clear', as for endnote 6 above.
25. See further Michael C Banner, 'Why and how (not) to value the environment', in Michael C Banner, *Christian ethics and contemporary moral problems*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 163–203.
26. Richard Denniss, 'Banking on hasty growth', *The Age*, 22 July, 2010, <http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/banking-on-hasty-growth-20100721-10l2d.html> (accessed 15 August 2010).
27. For example, Hamilton, *Growth Fetish*, chapter 2.
28. For example, Marglin, *The Dismal Science*, chapters 11–12 and *passim*.

29. Clifford Cobb, Ted Halstead and Jonathan Rowe, 'If the GDP is Up, Why is America Down', *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 276, No. 4, 1995, p. 59–78, <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/politics/ecbig/gdp.htm>; reprinted as http://www.rprogress.org/publications/1995/1995-10_GPI_Atlantic_Monthly.pdf (accessed 23 August 2010); quotation from p. 67 (or p. 9 of the reprinted version).
30. ANDI overview document, p. 2, http://www.acfonline.org.au/uploads/res/Meeting_Brief_-_24th_May.pdf. Also see background paper, http://www.acfonline.org.au/uploads/res/ANDI_Backgrounder.pdf.
31. Cobb, 'If the GDP is Up', p. 70 (reprint p. 11).
32. James B Twitchell, *Lead Us Into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1999, pp. 285, 286.
33. Twitchell, *Lead Us Into Temptation*, p. 283.
34. Ben Cooper, Cecilia García-Peñalosa and Peter Funk, 'Status effects and negative utility growth', *The Economic Journal*, Vol. 111, No. 473, 2001, pp. 642–665.
35. Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth* p. 102. See also p. 146, where he cites the eminent Harvard economist, Amartya Sen, to sustain the point.
36. I have reflected on this theme elsewhere. Andrew Cameron, 'Augustine on Obsession', in Brian S Rosner, (ed.), *The Consolations of Theology*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2008, pp. 27–49.
37. Peter N Stearns, 'History of Emotions: Issues of Change and Impact', in Michael Lewis and Jeannette M Haviland-Jones, (eds), *Handbook of Emotions: Second Edition*, Guilford Press, New York and London, 2000, pp. 16–29; quotation from p. 23.
38. Augustine, *City of God* XIX.24; cited in O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love*, p. 20.
39. O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love*, p. 23.
40. O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love*, p. 24.
41. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1983, p. 99.
42. Ched Myers, in Matthew Colwell, *Sabbath Economics: Household Practices*, Church of the Saviour, Washington, 2007, p. 15. For information see www.sabbatheconomics.org. I am thankful to the Reverend Geoff Broughton for bringing this work to my attention.