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Global Human Thriving

A Christian Perspective

Contribution to the workshop 'Furthering global human thriving through inter-religious and interdisciplinary discourse', Dec. 9, 11:30-14:30, in connection with the Parliament of the World Religions conference Melbourne, Australia

by

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Ladies and Gentlemen!

Friends and Fellow Seekers!

Talking about global human thriving from a decidedly religious point of view requires interpreting a particular religious tradition in light of today's ubiquitous ecological, economic, and political challenges. One cannot any longer stay content with a monologic explanation of happenings based on an authoritarian, unilateral interpretation of holy writ and the wisdom of old, at least not according to the Christian perception of life and human responsibility, because global issues like climate change, water scarcity, and nuclear overkill—to mention only a few—indiscriminately threaten the continuation of all of life as known so far. These issues compel us to pursue the quest for human thriving as an interdisciplinary, transcultural, and inter-religious discourse in order to come to appropriate sustainable solutions. What can Christians contribute to this discourse?

First and foremost: Christians will show a principally positive affirmation of life and human existence. This affirmation is rooted in the belief that life is created, which means that life not only originated at its very beginning in the creator but is also sustained by its creator up to the very present. Believing creation implies accepting the givenness of life in general and personal life in particular as willed by God, the source of all life. In human beings life has become conscious of itself because humans—unlike other creatures—are aware of their existence and thus can relate to life itself. That is why they have been perceived as endowed with the custodianship of and responsibility for life's thriving. However, once having become conscious of this responsibility, humans cannot but also acknowledge the disastrous effects of much they have done, something traditionally attributed to "original sin," meaning: as a human one simply can

neither avoid nor ever nullify the impact of one's actions, be it for the good or for the bad; the perils nowadays threatening radical annihilation of life have come about—at least in great part—as a result of human behavior and action (carbon [CO₂] emissions for instance).

Thus, positively affirming life in principle does not mean simply to ignore or sugarcoat grim reality or to plead for unrestricted vitalism. It means to honestly acknowledge—not to deny—human beings' failure to live up to the responsibility entrusted to them and the part their wrongdoings and negligence play, albeit *without* becoming paralyzed, desperate or overanxious, agitated, and cynical. Why? Because according to Christian faith the world will sooner or later come to an end anyhow, not to be annihilated, however, but, rather, to be renewed since life will continue in the world to come, “life eternal.” This Christians believe in, hope for, and anticipate in respective actions here and now. That is the cause of their affirming life positively, life in all its diversity.

Secondly—and as to be expected—Christians bring a distinctive perception of human thriving to the table, one which is neither exclusive nor exhaustive but rather genuinely inclusive since it addresses concerns vital to safeguard the thriving of life. Imposing these concerns would of course contradict their very intention. Instead, they have to be actually lived and shared in mutual discourse for the benefit of all, so that others can appropriate them as well, (thereby also heeding the motto of this gathering: “Hearing each other – Healing the earth.”)

In terms of content the Christian perception of human thriving is characterized by an honest concern for the wellbeing of all, whether kin, friend or foreigner. Christians are passionately committed to see to it that all have life and have it abundantly – at least they should be.

Life is never possessed nor owned like property. From the very moment one is born one participates and shares in life and is also—like it or not—in constant relationship with others until the hour of death. To live out and shape these relationships is one of the main tasks of growing and maturing in life; and since life has been handed down to us by our forebears, it is our responsibility now to preserve it and hand it on to others. This charge refers not only to procreation of offspring and raising children, but also refers to responding to the many and various claims for life made upon us by suffering individuals, communities in need, and the environment at large. The principal challenge is not to show pity but to really share life by giving of oneself, because life thrives on life!

Responding to the claims of life obviously results first of all in meeting urgent material survival needs like supplying food and clothing, housing and medical care. It also consists in providing companionship and comfort and in showing solidarity with those deprived of their rights through helping them to find a hearing and see justice being served. But concern for the wellbeing of all extends far beyond emergency relief and community support, since it can also never stay ignorant of the roles politics and economics play. Politics and economics oftentimes construct, stabilize, and perpetuate power structures which effectively keep people in poverty and critical dependence while at the same time securing privileges for a certain elite not necessarily concerned about a common good. Maintaining peace and justice is of preeminent concern, too, especially in these days of universal migration and global political and economic interference by anonymous bodies of multinational corporations and military forces. Likewise, concern for global human thriving cannot leave unquestioned cultural standards which privilege one gender at the expense of the other since such an attitude, however well established, denies genuine mutuality and inscribes socially predefined roles upon every individual of a given sex, thereby depriving these of other possibilities to contribute their full share.

Beyond pressing emergency relief and beyond economic, political, and socio-cultural obstacles to be overcome, environmental issues, too, need immediate attention since these critically affect human thriving everywhere. The longer they continue, the more they endanger human thriving, making us slowly but gradually realize the fatal impact of exploitative behavior and the true extent of actual devastation. This situation calls for concerted action by all in an attempt to keep these problems at bay somehow, a gigantic challenge indeed needing everyone's industrious energy to surmount.

Thirdly and finally: Christians cannot do otherwise than get seriously involved in attempting to alter the doom of fate by devoting their skills and means as well as themselves personally to the furthering of global human thriving, even when they know it is beyond their power to guarantee the desired outcome. Thus all their attempts toward changing the course of events for the better are pursued in hope, trusting that whatever they do will not jeopardize the intended objective. But they cannot than act in consciously taking the risk of being contradicted or faulted by the outcome. Other alternatives like simply not minding the situation, giving in and just letting it happen, or claiming to have found the definite solution by pretending to know the exact outcome for certain are just not real options: these attitudes either focus only on the wellbeing of

privileged individuals or reflect a positivism with still unshaken confidence in what technology actually achieves and unshaken trust that good intentions will unquestionably yield the desired result. Christians' attitudes differ markedly from these because Christians frankly admit that whatever action is taken always implies taking risks since the impact of what is being done can never be fully anticipated. This awareness makes them stay sober minded, realistic, and very pragmatic. Recognizing the complexities of the pressing issues at hand, Christians will eagerly seek input from well informed experts in various fields of knowledge and of diverse backgrounds for the sake of acquiring as truthful a comprehension as possible of what is really at stake. However, Christians will nonetheless be on the alert not to fall prey to doomsayers or champions no matter how eloquently and impressively they argue the case, nor are they inclined to commit to systemic shortsightedness or any kind of intellectual fashion and ideology. They keep this alertness alive—among others—by pursuing an active engagement in the interdisciplinary and inter-religious discourse across the cultures on the topics in question.

Knowing and frankly admitting that they don't have handy, readymade answers in their religious tradition for today's pressing questions, Christians are determined to throw their lot in with all who seek to find sustainable solutions. They will passionately do so as long as there is—still—time and opportunity, well knowing that despite their best intentions and efforts they cannot warrant the survival of humankind, much less the saving of the endangered world. But however modest their actions might be, Christians cannot respond with crossing their fingers and doing nothing. They simply cannot leave the situation to itself or wait for a miracle to right the wrongs and set things straight again. Being called to bear witness to the hope they actually live by, Christians truly struggle to find ways and means which will safeguard sustainable human thriving on the global level. Despite all trying circumstances and notwithstanding all the setbacks once and now, Christians will not despair in this pursuit because hope in the life to come is at the very heart of their struggling, a hope they want to share with everyone everywhere until the end of times, convinced that the cultivation of this hope itself is the most sustainable way to further human thriving.

Thank you for your kind attention!

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