

Response to Noah Toly's "The Macondoization of the World"

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Noah Toly's fine essay is rich in its suggestions on how the religions might play a part in the crucial planetary crisis of climate change. While there are many avenues I could pursue in responding to it, I will focus on just one, which is sparked by his definition of "Macondo" as "the vanity of the human condition apart from restrictions, and the calamities that often accompany enterprising, but overly ambitious intentions to transcend natural limits" (7). He fleshes out this definition with an analysis of the "post-environmentalists" who pretend to be "like God." He notes that their grand technological programs do not produce unvarnished goods but a greater scale and scope of risk—risk that is often borne by those who did not create the problem but are the first to feel its deleterious effects. This is increasingly seen to be the case with the issue of climate change—the people who contributed most of the carbon emissions creating the crisis are not the ones bearing its burdens. We also see the same phenomenon with the other major and related crisis of our time—the financial meltdown of 2008 in which bankers and CEO's prospered while the least wealthy lost homes and jobs.

Behind such events lie a "social imaginary" that, according to Charles Taylor, provides a "common understanding, which makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (quoted, 16-17). In other words, it is a social construct or model, a set of assumptions regarding our place in the scheme of things and what we should be doing. Such social imaginaries are seldom conscious or even acknowledged, but they have a huge influence on our interpretation of the world and on our behavior. The primary imaginary in current Western culture is the model of market capitalism, which tells us we are insatiably greedy individuals who deserve all that we can legitimately acquire and hoard. Needless to say, few if any Westerners would admit to this assumption as deeply influencing their thoughts or actions, but a case can be made for it (see, for instance, several of my books, especially Life Abundant and Blessed are the Consumers).

Toly's essay makes a strong argument against our reigning social imaginary in his critique of the post-environmentalists and their lack of acknowledging the inevitable tragic dimension to all human action. As a counter to this imaginary Toly introduces what he calls "the cruciform imaginary," a model of human living that transcends self-centeredness toward the well-being of broader environments. As an example of such an imaginary, Toly mentions Bonhoeffer's "Stellvertretung" or vicarious representative action, which at the deepest level for the Christian is "the incarnation, cross and resurrection of Christ, in whom God acts in freedom and love for the sake of all humanity" (quoted from Clifford Green, p. 27). Or, in Toly's summation, "the cruciform imaginary promotes the respect and enhancement of the integrity of life with and for others" (28). Thus, the "Macondoizers," the post-environmentalists (and I would add those operating at the top of the model of market capitalism), refuse to acknowledge not only the perduring presence of tragedy in all human action but also the issue of whether the perpetrators of action bear the costs of its effects, or if those losses are displaced onto others. Therefore, the cruciform imaginary, what in Christian circles is called the imitation of Christ, is not necessarily limited to Christians, nor is it merely a "religious" or "spiritual" dictum. Rather,

it may be one (certainly not the only) expression of how to live “the good life,” good as fulfilling to persons and to the planet. It is claiming that the almost universal religious mandate to “love the neighbor as oneself” is not merely a pious, sectarian suggestion, but the social imaginary that makes for abundant human living and planetary flourishing. This imaginary claims that “to save one’s life, one must lose it,” and by implication it also suggests that this strange counter-cultural advice is relevant to how human beings should be living on planet earth.

To support such a wild, risky statement, several books are required (one attempt is made in Blessed are the Consumers), but let me try a brief sketch of an argument. It can be shown from recent biological research into the human brain as well as into other species that the “the struggle for existence” is not the only rule of evolutionary, ecological science, but that “the struggle for existence” is also part of reality as we presently understand it. Hence, a social imaginary that includes intimations of “altruism,” broadly conceived as reciprocity and cooperative behavior at the biological level all the way to the self-sacrificial lives of the saints, is emerging as a possible model for human living on our planet. (See for instance, Patricia S. Churchland, Braintrust: What Neuroscience Tells Us about Morality [Princeton University Press, 2011]). The “survival of the fittest” need not be the only lesson we learn from Darwin, but also glimmers of the highest reaches of human morality (such as we see in the lives of Nelson Mandela or Dorothy Day) are present in different forms and to different degrees in all levels of our planet’s evolutionary growth. Therefore, which social or religious imaginary or model we affirm and live within makes a difference. If “loving the neighbor” is not merely a religious platitude but to some degree is found in all levels of life on our planet, then it may be closer to “reality” than the so-called “bottom line” of consumer capitalism, telling us that nothing matters except getting the most return for those who are most powerful. If, as John Hick claims, the religions are about “the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness,” then the religious imaginary may be our best bet for the good life for all of us creatures, human and otherwise (John Hick, An Interpretation of Religion [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989], 300). Perhaps this “wild,” counter-cultural model is closer to reality than the one we presently live by. Perhaps Iris Murdoch, the English novelist and philosopher, is on to something when she writes: “Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real. Love...is the discovery of reality” (“The Sublime and the Good,” Chicago Review, 13 [Autumn, 1959], 51).

If we were to accept this social imaginary or model as our set of working assumptions for actions in regard to the issue at hand—climate change—it would mean that those who created most of the greenhouse emissions would be “facing reality” if they also assumed the consequences for those actions, namely, taking the lead in international attempts to mitigate emissions. It would mean that the “tragedy” of the high-level, high-energy consumer lifestyle that has created the dire situation we are presently facing would be borne by folks like us for the benefit of the poorest human beings as well as the planet itself. This would not be a crazy thing to do; in fact, it would not only be “facing reality” but acting out of one strand of what it means to be a human being, namely exercising our biological tendency toward altruistic action. Biology and religion are not necessarily at odds; in fact, the strongest case for moral action may be that we were “created” to be “loving,” that is, able to recognize “that something other than oneself is real.”