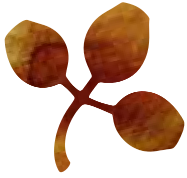

Manna Matters

QUARTERLY OF MANNA GUM

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Manna Matters is a publication of *Manna Gum*. Manna Gum is an independent non-profit organisation which seeks to help Christians reclaim and practise biblical teaching on material life, and to promote understanding of the ways our economic lives impact upon ourselves, others, and the earth.

Cover image courtesy of John Holcroft, *see also p. 9.*

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News From Long Gully

Welcome to a new look for *Manna Matters*, accompanied by a new logo for Manna Gum, and, best of all, a new website. I would like to pay tribute to the enormous contribution that the old logo (developed by Shelley Knoll-Miller) and the old website (by Josh Curtis) have made to Manna Gum's work, both done for free! Shelley's distinctive artwork continues to be generously shared in *Manna Matters* from time to time, and Josh has returned to design the new website. But, after fifteen years of solid service, it is time for a refresh.

Why Manna Gum?

The launching of a new website and new look provides an opportune moment to restate what the ministry of Manna Gum is all about, and where we see ourselves going over the next fifteen year period.

From its inception, Manna Gum was conceived as fundamentally a ministry to church. It was, and remains, impelled by the understanding that Christianity in the West has been hollowed out by a loss of much of what the gospel has to say about material life. Not only has this undermined the witness of Christians to broader society, it has also rendered Christian faith far less coherent, convincing and relevant to many Christians themselves. On the whole, Christian faith and Christian communities in Australia are in crisis.

It is for this reason—to be of service to the church—that Manna Gum has chosen to be independent of any particular church structures and agencies and remain something of a voice in the wilderness. After 500 years of domestication to capitalist culture, the radical teachings of the Bible about money, wealth, economic justice and our vocation to the Earth are more than a little unsettling.

Another reason we have chosen to be independent is because we didn't want to be forced into any of the conventional models of ministry. Manna Gum is not a social justice organisation, an environmental organisation, an evangelistic organisation, a Christian holiness organisation, a healthy lifestyle organisation, or a church renewal organisation. Rather, perhaps foolishly, we are trying to hold all of these things together. At the heart of Manna Gum's work is the attempt to restate something of the breadth and the depth—the fundamental integration and coherence—of the good news that is in Jesus.

Manna Gum phase 2

For the first fifteen years, Manna Gum's work focussed on rebuilding comprehension of what the Bible has to say about material life, comparing this to an analysis of our current global economic structure, and trying to wrestle with what all this might practically mean for those seeking to follow Jesus in twenty-first century Australia. This work is foundational and will continue to remain central.

However, Manna Gum is not just a ministry about household economics. Renewing the idea of a Christian practice of economic life at the personal and household level is the necessary foundation, but it is not the house. It is time to begin to say more about the upper layers of the house. In the coming years, we hope to begin to unpack two themes in particular.

(News continued on back page)

Are you not a Robber?

A Christian Ethic of Property (Part 2)

by Jonathan Cornford

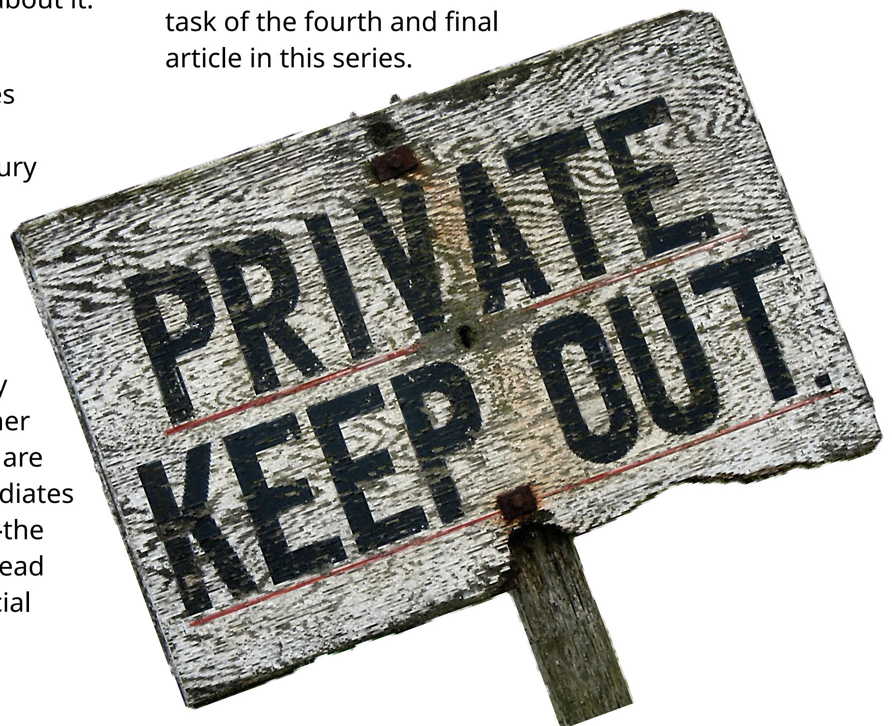
> It is God himself who has brought our race to a *koinonia*, by sharing Himself, first of all, and by sending His Word (*Logos*) to all alike, and by making all things for all. Therefore everything is common, and the rich should not grasp a greater share.
>
> **Clement of Alexandria**

> Why do you cast out the fellow sharers of nature, and claim it all for yourselves? The earth was made in common for all … Why do you arrogate to yourselves, ye rich, exclusive right to the soil? Nature, which begets all poor, does not know the rich.
>
> **Ambrose of Milan**

In America, there are self-described Christians who have armed themselves with an array of semi-automatic weapons in order to defend their God-given property rights from their own government. In Australia, there are socially conscious Christians who denounce home ownership as an illegitimate institution. On one side we find Christians who view property rights as a sacred institution of the highest order, on the other we find Christians who see property rights as a foundational injustice. Both agree that property rights play a linchpin role in the shape of our economic and political order, and on that score, they are both right. Many people reading this will automatically resile from these two extreme positions, but will nevertheless feel some sort of tension between the two ideas: that there is something sacrosanct about property and yet also the suspicion that there is something unjust about it. How do we unravel this tension?

In this series of articles, I am moving by stages towards a practical and ethical conception of property ownership for Christians in 21st century Australia, and maybe even towards a political vision of property ownership. In the previous article (*MM* Nov 2023), I examined how property is conceived in the Bible. I argued that the Old Testament provides a strong basis for recognising rights in property as a foundational human good, but it is a rather different kind of property right from what we are used to. In particular, the Old Testament repudiates any conception of *absolute rights in property*—the right to 'to do with mine what I will'—and instead subordinates property rights to a broader social vision. The New Testament does nothing to alter this conception of property, but rather turns a laser-like focus on our attitudes and behaviours with regard to property, and the effects this has upon us and upon our neighbours. The early Christian communities did not deny rights in property, but their defining move was ultimately to *transcend* them.

In this article and the next, I will attempt to provide a very brief survey of some of the high watermarks in Christian thinking about property rights in the intervening two millennia. My key proposition is that the Christian tradition holds rich resources which can help illuminate the questions and dilemmas of our own time. Nevertheless, digesting the wisdom of the past cannot lift from us the burden of having to think hard about the particularities and challenges of our own context, and this will be task of the fourth and final article in this series.



Early Christian thinkers

The early Christians (for the first three hundred years, or so) treated Jesus' teachings on wealth and possessions with a level of seriousness that is entirely alien to the version of Christianity that we have been acclimatised to. As Christianity evolved from a Jewish sect into a predominantly Gentile community, early Christian thinkers and teachers were forced to think hard about what it meant to translate Jesus' radical Jewish vision into the Graeco-Roman world, and this meant they had to think hard about property rights.

The Roman conception of property rights was starkly different to the biblical ideas we examined in the previous article. For the Romans, property—*dominium*—was conceived as a form of absolute power, and therefore of freedom. In the words of Jesuit scholar, Charles Avila, '*Dominium* was the ultimate right, the right which had no right behind it, the right which legitimated all others, while itself having no need of legitimation.' The right of property allowed one to do what one pleased with a thing, including the right to abuse it. (This Roman idea of *dominium* is one reason the English translation of the Hebrew word, *radah*, as 'dominion' in Genesis 1:26 has been so damaging to the ecological sensibility of Western Christians. See *MM* May 2022) In early Roman law, the male head of a household (the *Paterfamilias*) had the right of *ownership* over his wife and children, which meant that he even had the right to execute them if he saw fit. This was extreme, even by ancient standards.

The Roman right of *dominium* was perhaps most shaped by the institution of slavery. As Rome's imperial acquisitions expanded it also acquired vast numbers of slaves on whose shoulders it built its legendary wealth, and upon whom it came to depend. To do this, Romans had to treat slaves as *things* and not as people. To own property in Rome was to own slaves, which meant that 'property' was something that gave one *power over people*, and rendered them non-people. How disturbing then, to reflect that principles of Roman law embodying the concept of private ownership have remained the source of modern Western legal theory and practice up to the present day?

Into this world that sought and valued domination via property, the early Christians proclaimed a radical protest and advocated a scandalous alternate vision. *The Didache*, perhaps the earliest Christian text outside of the New Testament, sums up Jesus and the Apostles with frank directness: 'Never turn away the needy; share all your possessions with your brother, *and call nothing your own.'*

The virtually unanimous position of early Christian thinkers was that the goods of creation—the land, sea, air and all that they produced—were the common property of all humanity, and, indeed, of all creatures! Their reading of scripture told them that for one person to hoard goods, and so deny them to others, was a damnable offence. Consider the words of the 4th century bishop of Caesarea, Basil the Great:

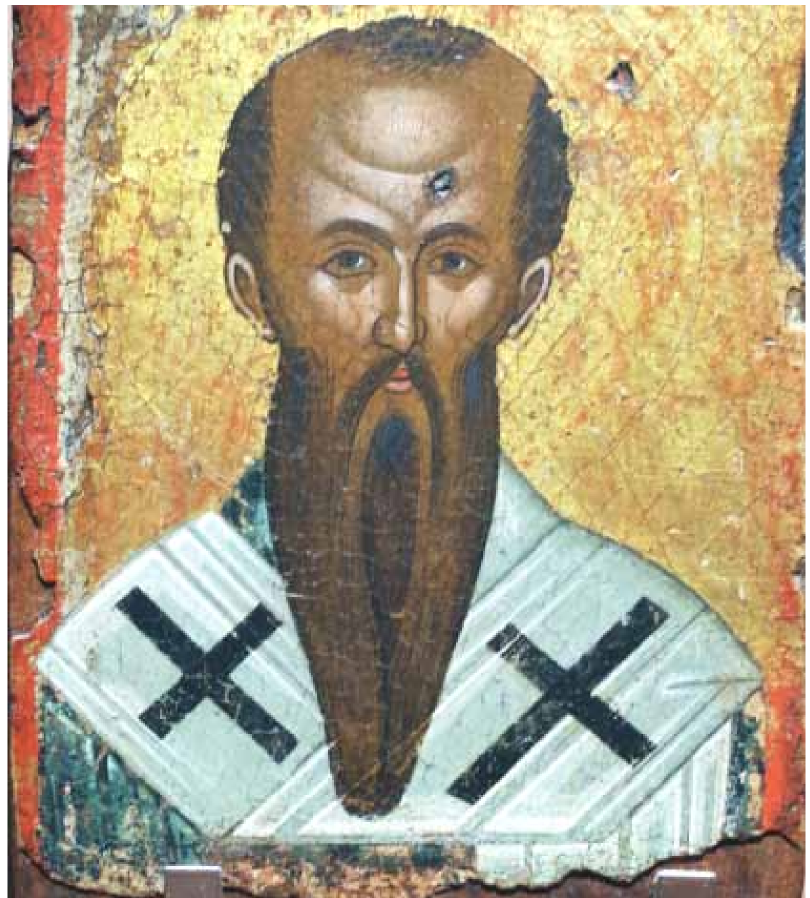
> Are you not a robber? You who make your own the things which you have received to distribute? [...] That bread which you keep, belongs to the hungry; that coat which you preserve in your wardrobe, to the naked; those shoes which are rotting in your possession, to the shoeless; that gold which you have hidden in the ground, to the needy. Wherefore, as often as you were able to help others, and refused, so often did you do them wrong.

Under this view, property rights only exist because of a wrong: they are a product of the Fall.

Under this view, property rights only exist because of a wrong: they are a product of the Fall. Because of human selfishness, it was necessary to institute some system that regulated access to goods of creation. That is, property was a concession to sin. Indeed, this was also the main view of early Christians concerning the state: that it was a product of the Fall, necessitated by human sinfulness. Thus, the Church Fathers acknowledged that there was a place for ownership of property, but it could only really be *justified* if it was *a means* by which goods might be distributed to those who needed them.

In the first place, the role of property should be to ensure that every household has enough to provide for its own needs. The early Christians placed a high value on what the Apostle Paul taught about self-sufficiency (*autarkeia* – see 2 Thess 3:6-13): for them, and for Paul, the meaning of self-sufficiency was not so much independence—the early Christians had remarkably thick forms of economic cooperation—but rather a vision of households as units of productive care for their members. The stress was on contributing good work, and on a sense of *enough*. Indeed, the importance which the

> Are you not a robber? You who make your own the things which you have received to distribute?
>
> **Basil the Great**



early Christians placed on limiting consumption to a modest sense of enough is rather confronting for 21st century Australian consumers.

> Just as the foot is the measure of the sandal, so the physical needs of each are the measure of what one should possess. Whatever is excessive —the things they call adornments— are a burden for the body. (Clement of Alexandria, d.216)

On the whole, the Church Fathers walked a fine line: they generally did not condemn wealth *as such*, but they condemned a life of luxury in the strongest terms.

> God has given us the authority to use our possessions, I admit, but only to the extent that it is necessary: He wishes them to be in common. It is absurd that one man live in luxury when there are so many who labour in poverty. (Clement of Alexandria)

> The people are starving, and you close your barns; the people weep bitterly, and you toy with your jewelled ring .... The jewel in your ring could preserve the lives of the whole people. (Ambrose of Milan)

The only possible justification for wealth was that it be used to provide for the needy:

> It is on this condition that He approves [ownership of possessions], and with this stipulation—that He commands them to be shared, to give drink to the thirsty and bread to the hungry, to receive the homeless, to clothe the naked. (Clement)

For Ambrose, the feisty bishop of Milan, it was not an act of charity for the wealthy to distribute their goods with the poor, but rather an act of justice: 'you are repaying a debt'!

As more wealthy people began entering the church in the century after the conversion of Emperor Constantine, some Christian leaders began questioning the source of their wealth. John Chrysostom asked whether property was acquired by just labour or by 'exploiting orphans' and 'robbing widows'. In his view, even more important than the rich distributing their goods was the need for them to stop amassing property in the first place: 'unless you desist from your robbery, you are not actually giving alms.'

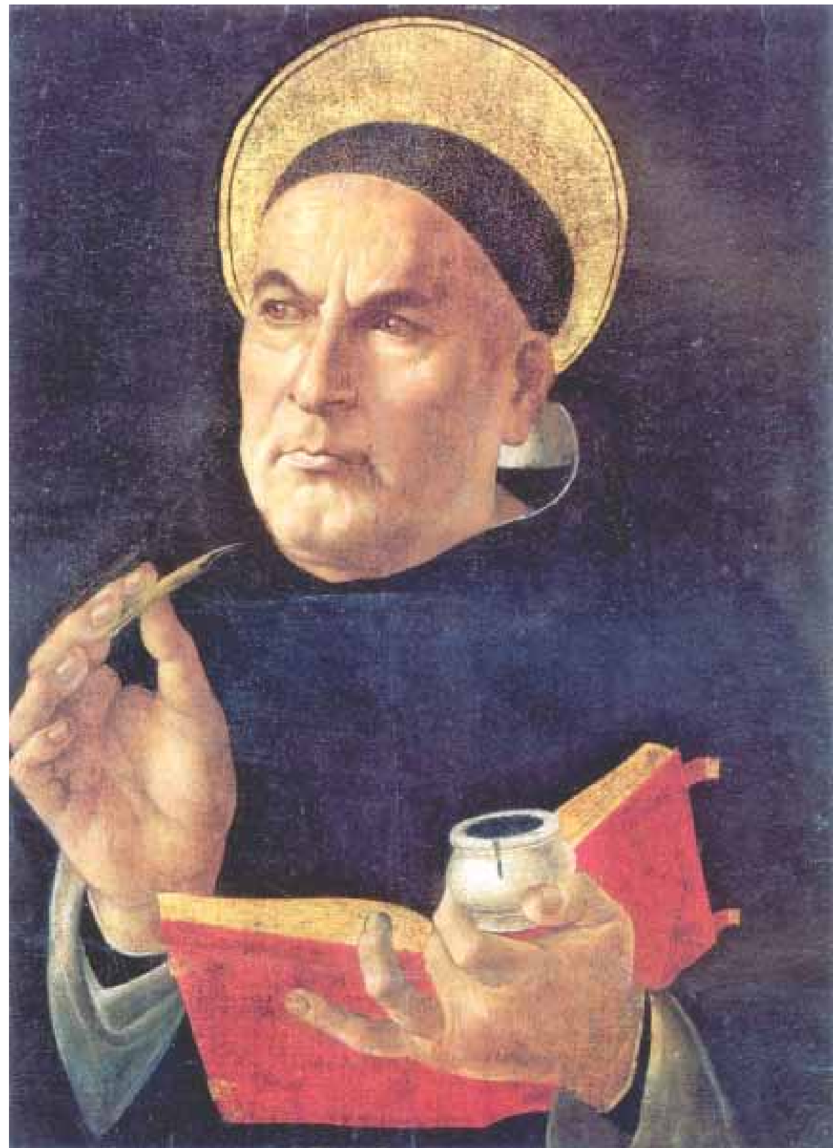
In summary, the early Christians had a very demanding view of property. Rights in property are a product of a fallen world, and serve the primary purpose of allowing households to provide for themselves a modest sense of enough. Thereafter, any possessions beyond such sufficiency can only be justified by their sharing with the needy. To be wealthy was to be in a morally questionable position that required concerted remedial action.

The good doctor: Thomas Aquinas

Ambrose of Milan and John Chrysostom preached and wrote at a time when the church was on the cusp of itself becoming a major owner of property—by which I mean landed wealth and slaves. In the two centuries following the conversion of Constantine (312 AD), Christianity moved from being a marginal and oppressed sect of commoners to becoming the religion of state, in the control of a super-wealthy aristocracy (see episodes 23 and 24 of MannaCast). Nevertheless, as the church evolved in Medieaval Europe, full of hypocrisies and outrages, it was never willing (or perhaps never able) to ignore the challenging teachings on property and wealth that it had inherited. Indeed, it was perhaps precisely because of the very evident failures of the church hierarchy that Mediaeval monks and friars continued to think hard about the economic implications of the gospel, now having to be applied to a far wider world of rulers, lords, peasants, markets, and merchants than the early Christians ever had to think about.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was the preeminent philosopher/theologian of this age, still referred to reverentially by some as 'the Angelic Doctor'. Aquinas largely accepted and reaffirmed the teachings of the Church Fathers concerning property, however he also offered a far more positive and constructive account of property rights than they had done.

Aquinas agreed that, in principle, the goods of creation were the common property of all creatures, there for each as it has need. Nevertheless, the human institution of property—by which each family unit takes responsibility for a small patch of creation—was a fitting means by which humans could enact their special vocation of 'dominion' (here Aquinas is faithful to the Genesis 1:26 meaning, and is not seduced by the Roman idea of *dominium*) as finite creatures who must live within their limits. That is, property is not so much a right as a *mode of responsibility* whose purpose is stewardship. At root, Aquinas offers a very practical ethic of property:



Thomas Aquinas *by Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510).*

> Human affairs are conducted in more orderly fashion if each man is charged with taking care of some particular thing himself, whereas there would be confusion if everyone had to look after any one thing indeterminately.

Here Aquinas is pointing to a truth laid bare by every common room kitchen: something that is everyone's responsibility quickly becomes no one's responsibility. However, the parcelling out of property amongst humans is not just because we like to evade responsibility, but also for the more positive reason that it matches our particularity and our finitude: I cannot take care of the whole Earth; rather, I enact my responsibility for 'the Earth' through my care for *this* little patch of it. This focussed

attention of each person to a portion of creation—‘property’—allows each to develop deep knowledge and expertise concerning that portion of creation, whatever it may be, and so manage it for the good of all in a way that a committee never could.

Aquinas agrees with Paul and the Church Fathers that the first task of property is self-sustenance. We are far better suited to take care of our own needs than others are, and, indeed, there is an inherent dignity in doing so. Here it is worth pausing, because it is rarely recognised that there is a vast difference between what the Christian tradition describes as self-reliance, or what St Augustine calls ‘self-love’, and what has come to be thought of as ‘self-interest’. In today’s understanding, self-interest involves pursuing your own desires, the rest of the world be damned. ‘Self-love’ in the Christian tradition simply recognises that, in the first instance, every creature is best equipped to meet its own needs and those of its young. But humans are unique of all creatures in that, whenever, for whatever reason, some creature is unable to care for itself, humans are also equipped, and indeed called, to provide care beyond themselves.

Aquinas comes to the striking conclusion that in a time of extremity, ‘stealing’ a loaf of bread is no sin.

In Aquinas’ thought, the difference between self-love (which he commends) and self-interest (which he condemns) becomes apparent in the clear distinction he makes between the *management* of property and the *use* of property. Human affairs and stewardship of creation are best taken care of when each human has their own portion of responsibility to manage. However, this does not mean that humans have the right to *consume* whatever property they may own. We only have a ‘right’ to consume what we need in order to live. Thus, Aquinas comes to the striking conclusion that in a time of extremity, ‘stealing’ a loaf of bread is no sin, because a person is merely having to take the creation mandate into their own hands when all other human devices have failed them. In this instance, ‘property’ is a moral fiction, whatever its formal legal standing.

Following the Fathers, Aquinas thus affirms that the first task of property is to supply our own needs, but beyond that, any superfluity should be directed towards meeting the unmet needs of others. Up to this point, property serves a human good. But once our needs are met, continuing to hoard material goods to ourselves does us no good: it fails to recognise what such material things are *good for*. Possessions beyond our needs ought to be distributed.

It is important to qualify that when Aquinas thinks about our ‘needs’ he does not only mean what is biologically required for survival. He understands that humans are social creatures, and that one function of property is to afford a certain social dignity that we all need: ‘no man ought to live unbecomingly’. This is clearly true, but it prompts the question: how much is required to live becomingly? Unfortunately, on this question Aquinas is silent: he seems to accept the socially determined norms of his time. Nevertheless, it does bring to our attention an enormously important point that must be confronted: the Christian tradition of thinking about property demands that we think about the thorny question of an adequate standard of living.

Conclusion

The Christian consensus about property in the Early Church and in Mediaeval times was radically different to our own, and closely rooted in their reading of scripture. The unanimous affirmation was that God has made all of creation available to all creatures, and that the human institution of property rights can only be justified if it is a *means* of ensuring the orderly care of people in a fallen world. Property should supply a dignified sufficiency for each family, but thereafter should be shared. Nevertheless, despite this powerfully consistent tradition of teaching, from the end of the Early Church period and developing through the Middle Ages, there began to be a growing discrepancy between the teaching and the practice of the church. When the Reformation finally fractured the authority of the Church, its teaching about property was washed away by the rising flood of capitalist acquisitiveness (see MannaCast episode 19). It is to Christian responses on the other side of this convulsion that we will turn in the next article.

Post-capitalism by Design not Disaster

by Samuel Alexander

This is an edited version of an article which first appeared in a longer form in vol 3 suppl B of The Ecological Citizen*. It has been edited and reprinted here with permission.*

This article addresses the subject of post-capitalist political economy. That is an intimidating topic, especially since transcending capitalism will be a monumental task. Capitalism certainly is not going to lie down like a lamb at the polite request of environmentalists, or anyone else. What this means is that serious sustainability and justice advocates of every stripe need to think very carefully about the question of strategy. More specifically, we must confront the question of where and how to invest our time, energy and resources, if we genuinely seek a fundamentally different type of economic system 'beyond capitalism.'

Over the last ten years I have been part of a movement advocating for a 'degrowth' process of planned economic contraction. In what follows I am going to use this alternative economic paradigm to frame and analyse the political economy of post-capitalism. I know very well 'degrowth' is an ugly term, but as a slogan for justice and sustainability, I maintain that it captures an essential insight: it directly evokes, more clearly than any other term, the need for planned contraction of the energy and resource demands of overgrown or 'developed' economies. That is an agenda that mainstream environmental and social discourse refuses to acknowledge, because significant contraction of energy and resource demands is incompatible with ongoing growth in GDP. This growth fetish simply must be overcome. *How* it is to be overcome is another question: the transition may take a variety of forms, with some certainly preferable to others. How might we manage and drive this transition by design rather than disaster, and what might society look like after capitalism?

Prerequisites for a degrowth transition

In 2018, the Danish political economist Hubert Buch-Hansen published a paper outlining a useful conceptual framework for thinking about how paradigm shifts in political economy occur. He argues that there are four main prerequisites:

1. a crisis or series of crises that cannot be resolved within the existing political economy;
2. a coherent alternative political project;
3. a comprehensive coalition of social forces attempting to produce the alternative paradigm through political struggle and social activism;
4. broad-based cultural consent—even passive consent—for the new paradigm.

This is a helpful framework to discuss the question of a degrowth transition to a post-capitalist society. I hope this provides a useful and provocative broad-ranging analysis to get this special issue underway, although I am sure I will raise more questions than I answer.

Capitalism is not in crisis – capitalism is the crisis

The first prerequisite for a paradigm shift in the existing political economy is *crisis*: but not just any crisis. It must be a crisis, or series of crises, in the system that the system itself cannot resolve. There are many reasons to think this prerequisite is met.

Growth economics is sometimes called the 'ideology of the cancer cell,' a provocative metaphor that neatly summarizes the fatal anomaly in capitalism, namely that, on the one hand, it must keep growing for stability, and, on the other hand, for various

Escape

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ecological and financial reasons, it simply cannot keep growing. Like a chorus of others, I do not believe capitalism can resolve this fundamental contradiction, which is creating conditions for a new, post-capitalist paradigm to replace it. Today, a range of theorists argue that degrowth is a necessary feature of any coherent macroeconomic alternative.

The clearest way to understand the multidimensional crisis of capitalism is to grasp the so-called 'limits to growth' predicament which, in brief, can be summaries as follows.

A) Ecological overshoot

By a wide range of indicators, the global economy is now exceeding the sustainable carrying capacity of the planet. Climate change is perhaps the most prominent ecological transgression, but there is also biodiversity loss, resource depletion, pollution, deforestation, and a long list of other deeply unsustainable impacts. The *extent* of ecological overshoot is key here. A 2019 Global Footprint Network analysis indicates that humanity would need 1.7 planets if the existing global economy could

be sustained over the long term. If a US or Australian way of life were globalised to the world's population, humanity would need four or five planet's worth of biocapacity, implying a need to reduce our 'first world' impacts by 75% or more!

B) Underconsumption by the global poor

Despite the global economy being in this state of ecological overshoot, it is also known that billions of people on the planet are, by any humane standard, underconsuming. If these people are to raise their living standards to some dignified level of material sufficiency, as they have every right to do, it is likely this will place further burdens on already overburdened ecosystems.

C) Growing population

To make matters more challenging still, there are now 7.8 billion people on Earth, increasing by about 200,000 people every day. Recent UN projections suggest we are heading for around 9.7 billion by mid-century and 11 billion by 2100.

All this radically calls into question the legitimacy of continuous economic expansion and rising material living standards in rich nations. And yet, despite the fact that humanity is already making grossly unsustainable demands on a finite biosphere, all nations on the planet—including or especially the richest nations—are seeking to grow their economies without apparent limit. It is assumed that a larger economy is always better; that ongoing growth is necessary for 'progress.' One does not have to be a sophisticated thinker to see that this is a recipe for ecological disaster, although alarmingly this point seems to be lost on almost all politicians and most economists.

Capitalism cannot resolve its ecological contradictions

In theory, there are two broad ways to respond to the limits to growth predicament within capitalism. The first is to try to create a form of capitalism that deliberately stops growing and actually voluntarily contracts within sustainable limits. The problem here is that various growth imperatives are built into the structure of capitalism, which makes the notion of 'degrowth capitalism' a contradiction in terms (to be distinguished from capitalism in recession, which is *unplanned* economic contraction). Therefore, the only other means of resolving the limits to growth predicament *within* capitalism is to radically decouple economic activity from environmental impact through what is called 'green growth.' The hope here is that technological innovation, market mechanisms, and efficiency improvements will reduce energy and resource demands even as economies continue to grow in terms of GDP. Nice in theory, perhaps, but what is happening is that the absolute reductions in energy and resource demands needed for sustainability are not occurring—certainly not to sufficient degrees—and as the global economy seeks ongoing growth, absolute decoupling gets harder and harder to achieve. Efficiency without sufficiency is lost.

How do we mak
beyond capitalis
rather than disa

So capitalism wants or needs what it cannot have: that is, limitless growth on a finite planet. This suggests that the first prerequisite of a paradigm shift in political economy is well and truly met: capitalism is facing a multi-dimensional crisis that it cannot resolve, and therefore, sooner or later, capitalism will come to an end. The question of

our time therefore becomes: how do we make the transition beyond capitalism by design rather than disaster?

The crisis of ecological overshoot also provides insight into what any alternative must look like. Broadly speaking, the implications here are clear but radical: if the global economy is to operate within the sustainable carrying capacity of the planet, this requires (among other things) the richest nations to initiate a degrowth process of planned economic contraction, on the path to a 'steady state' economy of stable and sustainable biophysical throughput. Obviously, the poorest nations would also need to achieve some 'steady state' in time, but first their economic capacities must be developed in some appropriate form to ensure basic needs for all are met. However, the focus of this discussion is the wealthy nations.

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An alternative political project

The second prerequisite for a paradigm shift in political economy—for a degrowth transition, in particular—is the existence of an alternative political project. This is not the forum to comprehensively defend this alternative political project, so I am just going to state it, or one version of it, in order to show that an alternative post-capitalist political project is beginning to take form.

The following political agenda is, in my view, both coherent and attractive, but it is, all too obviously, disconnected from political 'realism' in developed nations (or anywhere) today. Of course, I would argue that this is an indictment of mainstream politics, rather than of degrowth.

Alternatives to GDP: Any political transition beyond capitalism requires transcending the GDP fetish and establishing better and more nuanced ways to measure societal progress, such as the Genuine Progress Indicator. Post-growth measures of progress like this open up space for political parties to implement policy and institutional changes (like those below) which would genuinely improve social wellbeing and enhance ecological conditions, even if these would not increase, and probably even decrease, GDP.

Diminishing resource caps: If the rich, overgrown economies are serious about moving toward a just and sustainable human inhabitation of Earth, then first we must acknowledge that we are hugely over-consuming our fair share of global resources, and second, we must institute diminishing resource caps which put strict limits on national resource flows. Fortunately, this would incentivise the efficient use of resources and disincentivise waste, and lead to degrowth in ecological impacts. The question of exactly "how?" is likely to be resolved only through practical experimentation, not theory.

Reduced working hours (in the formal economy): Diminishing resource caps mean a lot less resource-intensive production and consumption would take place in a degrowth economy. This would almost certainly lead to reduced GDP. To avoid the unemployment that typically flows from declining GDP, a degrowth economy would reduce work in the formal economy and share available work amongst the working population. Financial security in a contracting economy could be maintained through policies such as a Universal Basic Income, Universal Basic Services or a Job Guarantee.

Rethink government spending: Currently, governments shape many of their policies and spend much of their money in order to promote economic growth. Under a degrowth paradigm, it follows that the ways governments spend their funds would need to be fundamentally reconsidered. For example, fewer airports, roads, and military equipment; more bike lanes and public transport. How we spend our money is one way to vote for what exists in the world. Rethinking government spending would also need to go hand in hand with transformations in the systemic provision of basic services. For example, Cubans have better health on average than US citizens and yet spend an estimated 90% less on healthcare per capita. This suggests that there is ample room to provide for basic services in an affordable way while also making more public money available to fund other social projects (like a Universal Basic Income or renewable energy technologies).

Renewable energy transition: In anticipation of the foreseeable stagnation and eventual decline of fossil fuel supplies, and recognizing the grave dangers presented by climate change, a degrowth economy would divest from fossil fuels and invest in a renewable energy transition with the urgency of 'war time' mobilisation. This will be much more affordable and technically feasible if energy demand across society is greatly reduced: a key feature of a degrowth society. The energy transition needed cannot just involve 'greening' the supply of energy, it must also involve greatly reduced demand.

Banking and finance: Our systems of banking and finance currently have a growth imperative built into their structures. Any degrowth society would have to create systems that did not require growth for stability. Debt jubilees would probably be required, especially with respect to the poorest nations. These are particularly complex issues and the forces of opposition will be fierce. But the point is that any post-growth transition is going to require deep changes to the most fundamental financial institutions of capitalism.

Population policies: This is always controversial territory, but the environmental logic is compelling. As population grows, more resources are required to provide for the material conditions of human wellbeing. We need to discuss this topic openly and with all the wisdom and compassion we can muster.

Prosperous Descent

Artwork by Greg Foyster, appearing in Art Against Empire *(Samuel Alexander, 2017). Greg is an author, fiction writer, journalist, and cartoonist.*

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For more, visit https://www.gregfoyster.com/ or @gregfoyster.

Population policy must be part of any coherent politics of sustainability in recognition that we live on a 'full Earth.'

Distributive justice: Last but not least, environmental concerns cannot be isolated from social justice concerns, both nationally and globally. The conventional path to poverty alleviation is via the strategy of GDP growth, on the assumption that a 'rising tide will lift all boats.' A degrowth economy would recognise a rising tide will sink all boats, and thus poverty alleviation must be achieved much more directly. Rather than growing the economic pie, a politics of degrowth would slice the economic pie differently through a major redistribution of wealth and power. Prominent policies here include the notion of a Universal Basic Income, while others argue for a Job Guarantee, or Universal Basic Services. These types of policies would go a long way to directly eliminating poverty, with inequality further reduced by policies such as maximum wage legislation, and progressive wealth, income, and land taxes. Eco-socialists would argue that a just distribution of wealth and power would have to involve significant socialisation of property and curtailment of 'the market.' How far socialisation would need to go, and the nature of such a transformation, is open to debate.

These policy platforms—no doubt all in need of far more elaboration and discussion than can be given here—are coherent political, economic, and social goals if a transition to a degrowth society were recognised as necessary. Each of these policies could take various forms, and there is, and should be, debate within the degrowth movement and beyond about various ways to structure a post-capitalist society. The main point here is simply that a relatively coherent and developed alternative politico-economic project is emerging to replace the capitalist paradigm. So, the second prerequisite for a paradigm shift is also arguably present: there is a coherent, alternative political economy.

Nevertheless, I am the first to admit that this policy platform is so unpalatable to the dominant cultural consciousness that it would be political suicide for any political party to try to implement it at present. In other words, what is arguably politically necessary is both socially and politically unthinkable—which is one reason, no doubt, for our current state of despairing political paralysis.

Because of this, the policy platform outlined above is unlikely to initiate a degrowth transition. Rather, any transition will only ever be the outcome of social movements; the outcome, that is, of social forces that emerge out of crisis (or a series of crises) and which actively create the cultural consciousness that sees policies for degrowth as both necessary and desirable. It is through crisis that I see the citizenries in affluent societies being shaken awake from the depoliticising effects of affluence.

In other words, a post-capitalist government may only be the outcome, not the driving force, of a transition to a just and sustainable society. Therefore, our best hope for inducing a degrowth transition by design is to build a post-capitalist economics 'from below': to build within the shell of the current system that is currently in the process of deteriorating. Waiting for governments to act would be like waiting for Godot: a tragi-comedy in two acts, in which nothing happens, twice.

Support from a comprehensive coalition of social forces

This leads me to the third prerequisite for a degrowth transition: that it must have support from a comprehensive coalition of social forces. Briefly, I see four key features of post-capitalism emerging from the grassroots (features which must scale up for a degrowth economy to emerge):

1. Non-monetary forms of the sharing economy, whereby communities self-organise to share resources in order to save money, partially 'escape the market,' and avoid significant amounts of production. This is a key reason why a degrowth economy could still thrive even when contracting in GDP terms: produce much less but share much more, for societies can create common wealth through sharing. This is part of what 'efficiency' means in a degrowth economy.

2. A degrowth economy is likely to require a transformation of the household economy from being merely a place of consumption, to becoming a place of production and self-provision. There are two main reasons why. Firstly, by producing more within the household, less time is needed to work in the formal economy, leaving more time outside the market for social activism and community engagement. Secondly, if financial crises deepen in coming years, the household economy may be an essential means of meeting basic needs, so the task is to prepare now for what may well prove to be harder economic times ahead. We should aim for sustainability, but we may have to settle for resilience. On this topic there is no better place to look than the work of permaculturist David Holmgren, whose vision and insights here are indispensable.

3. A key feature of a degrowth economy involves significant localisation of the economy, moving toward a 'bioregional' economy where local needs are predominantly met with local resources, shortening the chain between production and consumption.

Finally, any post-capitalist economy is going to require new modes of production, moving away from profit-maximising corporations (often owned by absentee shareholders), towards an economy

where worker cooperatives, community enterprises, and not-for-profit models are the dominant forms of economic organisation, paying people living wages but reinvesting surpluses back into the local community. Again, there are various ways to imagine such alternative economic arrangements and experimentation may be required.

Alternative modes of economy, such as these four, are bubbling everywhere under the surface, which is a hopeful sign. The Transition Towns Movement, for example, is a coherent manifestation of this grassroots approach to building local, community economies. But one must also admit that these transgressive experiments remain small and marginalised by the dominant modes of political economy. So, in terms of the third prerequisite for a post-capitalist transition, we have to conclude that the social forces are mobilising but have not yet been able to scale up to positively disrupt, or even significantly threaten, the dominant paradigm.

Cultural consent: The sufficiency imperative

The final prerequisite for a post-capitalist degrowth transition is broad-based cultural consent. Passive consent may suffice here, without the majority of people actively seeking degrowth. This really is a critical element in any planned transition in political economy and one that currently does not exist in terms of degrowth. It seems the majority of people either do not think degrowth is necessary or, if they do, they do not like what it means in terms of reduced and transformed consumption and production practices.

> **Waiting for governments to act would be like waiting for Godot: a tragi-comedy in two acts, in which nothing happens, twice.**

I think there are two main reasons why our culture is not ready to embrace degrowth. The first is a deep-seated techno-optimism that shapes cultural thinking about environmental problems. This view assumes that technology and market mechanisms will be able to resolve the crises of capitalism without system change and even without much in terms of 'lifestyle' change. In other words, the zeitgeist seems to be that consumer affluence is consistent with justice and sustainability, because it is assumed that efficiency improvements in modes of production will be able to produce 'green growth' without having to rethink consumption practices. This points to a serious cultural obstacle to a degrowth transition: the dominant conception of the good life under capitalism is based on consumer affluence. It seems to me that there will never be a post-capitalist politics until there is a post-consumerist culture that is prepared to embrace material sufficiency as a desirable way of life. Herein lies the importance of the voluntary simplicity, simple living, and downshifting movements. Although in need of radicalisation (and organisation for collective action), these movements or subcultures are beginning to create the cultural conditions needed for a politics and economics of degrowth to emerge.

It all depends on the ideas (and practices) that are lying around

When the crises of capitalism deepen—perhaps in the form of a new financial crisis or a second Great Depression—the task will be to ensure that such destabilised conditions are used to advance progressive humanitarian and ecological ends, rather than exploited to further entrench the austerity politics of neoliberalism. I recognise, of course, that the latter remains a real possibility, as did the arch-capitalist Milton Friedman, who expressed the point in these terms:

> Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable.

I do not often find myself in complete agreement with Milton Friedman, but on this point I am. It is essential for the ecocentric community to keep hopes of a radically different and more humane form of society alive, until what today seems impossible or implausible becomes, if not inevitable, then at least possible and perhaps even probable.

Dr. Samuel Alexander is the Director of the Simplicity Institute and the Academic Director of Sustainability and Environmental Action for the School for International Training. An avid practitioner of sustainable living strategies, he has co-produced the doco A Simpler Way.

Beauty and Uncertainty in Timor Lorosa'e

by Lauren A.

I recently spent a year living and working in Timor-Leste (known locally as Timor Lorosa'e and formally as East Timor), just an 85-minute flight from Darwin.

I had been wanting to live and work in a developing context for as long as I can remember; hearing many stories over the years of people I respected doing so, as fieldworkers: people committed to living in slums, or professionals who had gone to volunteer with the Australian Volunteers Program (AVP). My upbringing in the church and with Christian organisations taught me that a concern for global injustice and inequality is a fundamental part of what it means to be a disciple of Christ. And as a lawyer, I value the impact that a well-functioning justice system and a set of robust, socially responsible laws can have in addressing these issues, alongside political, social, and economic change.

So, on assignment with AVP, I went to work with a Timorese-led not-for-profit organization advocating for legality, transparency, accountability, and the rule of law in the judicial and legislative systems in Timor-Leste. Based in the capital, Dili, AVP was a great opportunity for me to 'test out' living overseas and to use my legal skills in the context of 'development' work in a country I'd consider living long-term, to begin to learn its language, culture, and history, to make connections and to see whether there was a role for me to play.

Timor-Leste's history is worth knowing. After Portuguese colonisation, the Indonesian occupation, and United Nations administration, it has been independent since May 2002 and has had many peaceful elections since then. Its economy relies heavily on gas exports and a large portion of the population continue to live in insecure conditions, with inadequate income, nutrition, and sanitation, as well as a high levels of un-or-under-employment.

Life in Timor

Tropical island life

Think super cheap mangoes, papaya, and dragon fruit, fish, and the occasional octopus sold along the beach by men with long sticks over their shoulders, as well as fabulous snorkelling and diving right off the beach. An iconic Timor scene is sitting on the

All images by the author.

beach, sipping a coconut (freshly cut by your local coconut seller out of a cart or motorbike truck on the side of the road) washing away the humidity-fuelled exhaustion, occasionally interrupted by the smell of burning plastic.

But Timor is also a very mountainous country. 40% of it is at a 40% or more gradient and that makes road maintenance and farming difficult. It's hot and humid all year round, with a wet season and an ever so slightly cooler dry season. In the wet, they wait for the next *udan boot* (big rain/storm) to flood the poorly drained streets, or worse. And of course, mosquitoes are rampant, with very little control in place or education, despite dengue being widespread.

Language

While Portuguese and Tetum are recognised as official languages, the country has at least 32 additional local languages, with each of the 13 municipalities having their own distinct culture and language. Very few people speak Portuguese, most people speak Tetum, many (especially those over 30) speak Bahasa Indonesian and most people also speak at least one local language. Learning the language was one of the best parts of life in Timor, and the main way I began to understand Timor, its people, and culture. Tetum is a simple, literal language with many patterns, supplemented by Portuguese and Indonesian words to describe complex concepts or shorten descriptions. One memorable moment was a productive meeting I had with some colleagues discussing the interpretation of key provisions in the domestic violence law. The meeting was iconically Timor: hot spotting from our phones because the Wi-Fi didn't work again, using Google Translate to translate the law from Portuguese (as it's the official language of the law in Timor) into English (for me) and Indonesian for them (because Tetum, spoken by only 1.5 million people, is not yet on Google Translate), and conversing in Tetum, with reference to an outdated paper version of the law that someone had previously translated to Tetum.

Even when I spoke the language, it was evident I still understood little: unlike our culture, Timorese tend to be very indirect, information is largely shared orally and is descriptive, and there's plenty of subtext and assumed knowledge. There are no addresses in Timor, only descriptions of iconic landmarks near your house and then asking around, and both places and people have many names. Even emails in workplaces are often a mere confirmation of verbal communication, but WhatsApp, Facebook, and TikTok are increasingly supplementing the oral-based communication.

Even when I spoke the language, it was evident I still understood little.

Waiting in uncertainty

Timorese people are proud - their independence and democracy are important to them. But my experience is that they also expect little and have little sense of entitlement, especially to rights and services, perhaps the result of an uncertainty and distrust that underpins Timorese society. Not so much a lack of trust in relationships but a lack of trust that things will work out, that the roads will be open tomorrow, that their family will be well. There is uncertainty about what is happening next, what exactly the rules are or where corruption may be creeping in, or what will happen when the Petroleum Sovereignty Wealth Fund runs out and Timor faces its 'fiscal cliff'. And for the 42-45% of the population that lives below the poverty line, uncertainty about where the next meal will come from. This leads to very little forward planning (even wedding invitations are given out just a week before), and an acceptance of illness and death which appears to be mourned in structured, cultural ways rather than emotional ones.

Life in Timor is one of waiting, patience, and perseverance. The sense of urgency that I felt every day in the workplace in Australia had no outlet in a Timorese workplace. Rather, I rarely knew what was

going on, either because there was no specific plan, it wasn't coming to fruition, it wasn't communicated, or it was communicated but in a language I didn't understand. Things happened in their own time or *aban* (tomorrow). That was the hardest thing about life in Timor. I learned more and more to give up a sense of urgency to get things done, to "go with the flow", still to plan but to hold that plan very lightly, and to occasionally, ever so gently, be assertive if a plan needed to be met. And yet, regardless of my input, immense things were achieved, in their own time but still surprisingly largely on time-*ish*.

Family

The idea of working from home (for your paid job) is unfathomable because houses are crowded. Many of my colleagues had about 20 people in their household and/or were financially and otherwise responsible for 20 people, including cousins and nieces and nephews from the districts. For many, the office is the place to relax. Immense family obligations hold people together, and to an extent, also hold them back. But this, along with moderately priced land that stays in families (although mostly along patrilineal lines) and houses being cheap to build because families build their own, contributes to very few homeless people in Timor's capital. Houses are built almost literally brick by brick as money is found, sometimes over a decade.

Gender norms

There are strong gender norms in Timor and high rates and tolerance of gender-based violence. Reputable 2016 studies found that almost two of every three women (15-49 years) reported having experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetime and that, in two surveyed areas, 10-12% of males interviewed had perpetrated a rape in the last 12 months. While daily this was mostly hidden, gender norms affected seating on public transport, roles in the kitchen, office, and at home, who drove and owned cars (largely men), and even the common greetings/acknowledgements that needed to be passed back to my husband. At least some of these norms seemed connected to the predominant Catholic culture, mixed in with local religious traditions.

Microlets

As wealth has increased for some, the number of cars in Timor's capital has outstripped the capacity of the small streets to handle them. But most people get around on motorbikes and public transport: buses, *aguunas,* and *microlets*. The *microlets* (small vans, smaller than a kombi van, that can fit up to 25 people and the occasional chicken or farm produce) are a microcosm of Timorese culture. Observe the *microlets* for a time and you will see:

- the kindness and camaraderie of drivers and passengers looking out for each other,
- subconscious behaviour to move further back/forward, to hang out the doorway, to the front seat, or to offer one's lap to someone, in line with unspoken rules regarding on gender, age, or ability,
- safety issues like sexual harassment, poor maintenance, speeding, and swerving,
- the way that everyone knew every *microlet* route by heart, and it was assumed that everyone else knew too, and
- the lack of sense of entitlement or empowerment that people felt, particularly women—to not breathe in the cigarette smoke of the one male passenger despite the "smoking prohibited" sign, or to not have to listen to rap at 100 decibels that shakes your core.

Rice

Rice is the staple food for Timorese people, three times a day. A meal without rice isn't a meal. You might have meat, vegetables, and potato, but

you still need rice. Rice with oil or margarine is a relatively common thing for children to be fed to fill them up, and malnutrition and hunger is rife. Other staples are *kankung* (spinach), beans, bananas, tofu, and tempeh sold in $1 USD bags at markets. The minimal wage for formal work is $115 USD/month, so phone credit and electricity are often bought in $1 or $2 amounts as it's too expensive to invest in several days' worth at a time. There's currently a concern about food shortages and food insecurity as many Timorese are subsistence farmers and the prolonged period of dry conditions this year put the rice and maize production at risk.

Reflections on development and faith

After many years volunteering with development organisations in Australia, it was interesting to work with a small, local NGO at the receiving end of funding, mostly from larger institutions. I did see donor-driven development, with most projects going for a year or less, limiting the ability to give employment certainty to staff or retain volunteers to paid work, and unrealistic timelines creating stress. Despite these difficulties, I witnessed many NGOs doing great things on the ground, like JSMP, Maluk Timor, ADRA, World Vision, Estrela+, and more, supported by many Australians and Australian organisations.

Phrases that I used to use like "love the least of these" (Matt 25) ... had no place in my vocabulary when I was there.

I saw other glimpses of the kingdom everywhere: in strangers, in my colleagues, in other expats—in their quick responses to assist with a motorbike accident or otherwise, their commitment to their work despite the exhausting things that might be going on for them at home or elsewhere, their faithful pursuit of their vocation and their perseverance to commit to life in Timor despite the trying parts of life.

Despite the welcome of Timorese people, being there as an expat felt complicated at times. At least one local described the many expats, development workers and NGOs in Timor as the continuing colonisation of Timor. It felt important to be requested by a local NGO, who knew the burden of having a *malae* (foreigner) around but thought the benefits outweighed the costs. For friends who have been in Timor for 3-20+ years, learning the language, sticking around, and getting to know their local community seemed important, those complicated feelings diminishing with each year and level of fluency. Interestingly, phrases that I used to use like to "love the least of these" (Matt 25), "have a heart for the poor", or "love my neighbours" had no place in my vocabulary when I was there. It was just life.

Back in Australia, we can be grateful for our clean and safe streets free of barbwire at head height, open drain holes and half washed away bitumen, for variety in your food, for fast internet, for high wages even if they don't feel that high right now, for OHS standards, for clear expectations and plans that come to fruition, and for the sense of certainty and trust we have in what may come tomorrow or next year for us, our family and our country. We can also learn to give more generously to our families, communities, and those less privileged than us, through development work or otherwise, and to re-learn lost skills like fixing things, to be patient, to accept uncertainty and when things don't go to plan, and, for the privileged among us, to maybe not expect quite so much.

Timor is chaotic, beautiful, hot, humid, fascinating, curious, surprising, amazing, welcoming, and rough around the edges. Living and working there was one of the best things I have ever done and a year during which I felt very sure that I was doing what I was supposed to be doing.

Lauren is a lawyer who most recently worked with the Judicial System Monitoring Program in Timor-Leste on justice system reform and gender-based violence issues. Her home base is on Wurundjeri and Jagera/Turrbal country.

Firstly, it is time to begin thinking hard about the economic structure/s of the church. This includes thinking again about the economic arrangements of local congregations, denominational structures and Christian ministries. But even more deeply, it requires uncovering the relational and material ties that underpin the community of Christ. Whether it is recognised or not, the church is an *economic commumunity*, and the economic form it takes has a large bearing on the depth and strength of faith that it nurtures amongst its members, and the witness it provides to the watching world.

Secondly, it is time to begin rebuilding a sense that Christianity has something vital to contribute to the economic and political life of our nation and world. This is no straightforward task. The church is well and truly in retreat in Australian public life, and much of the blame for this can be attributed to its own deep failings. And to some extent it is appropriate that the church observe a season of penitence as it re-examines who it is and what its core mission should be.

But the economic and ecological crises of our times are far too dire that Christians remain silent or uninvolved in the life of 'the earthly city'. Somehow, we need to begin to rebuild a Christian vision of economic life that can speak hopefully and intelligently into the search for a way to transition away from the death spiral of global capitalism.

We are not so foolish as to pretend that Manna Gum has answers to any of these great challenges. But we intend to do our part in thinking and speaking about them. We hope you will join us for the journey.

Jonathan Cornford

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EMAIL: jonathan@mannagum.org.au
PH: (03) 5441 8532

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Manna Matters is produced on the lands of the Wurundjeri and Dja Dja Wurrung peoples, both members of the Kulin nation. The 'wurun' of the Wurundjeri refers to Eucalyptus viminalis, *a sacred tree whose leaves are required for a 'welcome to country'. The early Europeans colloquially named this tree the Manna Gum for the sweet white gum (lerp) it sometimes produces, which reminded them of the biblical story of the manna in the wilderness. In doing so, they unknowingly associated a locally sacred tree with one of the foundational lessons in God's economics: collect what you need; none shall have too little; none shall have too much; don't store it up; there is enough for all!*