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Climate change and the challenge of immortality: Faith, denial and intimations of eternity

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Abstract

The relentlessly mounting science of climate change and global heating encourages thoughts of future humanity as “survivors of a failed civilization” (Lovelock, 2007, p. 202) if indeed there are survivors at all. The possible endings of the world as we know it are diverse, as are the technological fixes that might salvage and sustain life on the planet Earth or its alternatives. Theories of human-caused climate change have moved from heterodox to orthodox state-sponsored science in just a few years. However currents of scepticism and denial run vigorously against the scientific tide, strengthened by the global vested interests of carbon-intensive economic growth. Transnational environmental movements and concerted political commitment in many parts of the world have not achieved the necessary carbon reduction policies, as demonstrated by the failed UN-sponsored Copenhagen climate conference in December 2009. Streams of religionist doomsday movements gain volume and strength, prophesying Apocalyptic end times of a quite different order to planetary heating.

Climate change is a cultural crisis of life worlds that begs critical anthropological analysis. What are the cultural resources that human societies are bringing to bear on the problem of climate change? How do institutional religions and various forms of heterodox knowledge figure in the mobilization of action to protect the balance of nature, or accelerate its further disruption? How do forms of environmentalism articulate with religion-based heroic myths and immortality thinking in a world of secular politics and science where Earth, not Other/After Worlds, is the site of human self-perpetuation? How can anthropology enhance understanding of the cultural and psychological processes that sustain scepticism and denial of a heating, deteriorating world? This paper will explore these questions based on ethnographic research with religious adherents and other residents in an intensely carbonised region with high climate change vulnerability – the Hunter Valley of New South Wales.

Keywords: Climate change, scepticism, cultural crisis, immortality, death, religion, Hunter Valley, NSW

Introduction

The growing body of anthropological work on the problem of climate change draws on ethnographic methods of research and a variety of theories, from the more interpretive (e.g. Macrae 2010; Milton 2008) to critical and structural approaches (e.g. Baer 2009). A recent edited book, *Anthropology and Climate Change*, incorporates insightful ethnographic case studies of climate-culture relationships, climate change in specific localities, and policy applications of anthropological knowledge (Crate and Nuttall 2009). In this paper, I focus on the way anthropology can analyse anthropogenic climate change (ACC) as a cultural crisis, especially among populations of affluent Western democratic polities where there is a surfeit of mass media information and some attempts at government policy responses to the problem. In considering the cultural significance of climate change (CC)¹, I examine two dimensions of CC knowledge/action: the growth of CC science and politics; and the increasing prominence of sceptical and denialist views.

The paper draws on ethnographic and survey research I have undertaken in one region of Australia, the Hunter Valley of NSW². I explore the ways that understandings of climate change are linked to foundational meaning systems that include religious and secular motifs of apocalypse, eternity, happiness and renewal. I argue that apparently antagonistic CC positions are in fact interdependent, and have a dynamic coexistence with other cultural constructions of transcendence in a shifting terrain of public concern. Understanding these connections requires a cultural theory of humanity's commitment to the future, and eternity.

Growth of scientific evidence and political salience

While scientific understanding of ACC has been around for a century or more, a constellation of events occurred in 2006 to bring this specialised body of knowledge to wider public attention, especially in Australia. These included: the much heralded draft 4th report of the IPCC³; the well-publicised Al Gore film, *An Inconvenient Truth*; and the UK government-sponsored Stern report on the economic effects of CC⁴. In Australia and particularly NSW, there was an enduring and serious drought, which many of those affected attributed to the process of CC. The widespread experience of drought, always a politically salient event in Australia, became part of the *phenomenology* of CC.

1 When I refer to climate change in general, the abbreviation CC is used. When referring specifically to anthropogenic climate change, the abbreviation ACC is used. Global warming, a way of referring to the main specific effect of climate change, is abbreviated as GW, and global heating, a less euphemistic term, as GH.

2 This research is funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Project, *Climate Change, Place and Community: An Ethnographic Study of the Hunter Valley, New South Wales* (DP0878089). Co-investigators are Glenn Albrecht and Nick Higginbotham.

3 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). 2007. Fourth Assessment Report: Climate Change 2007. <http://www.ipcc.ch/activity/ar.htm> Accessed 11 Feb 2007

4 Stern N. 2006. Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change, 30 October 2006. London: HM Treasury http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/independent_reviews/stern_review_economics_climate_change/sternreview_index.cfm Accessed 30 Nov 2006

By 2006, CC sciences had accumulated a diverse and compelling evidence base for assertions of human caused global heating (GH), and there was increasing government funding support, international cooperation, and policy initiatives. A broad array of environmentalist groups, multilateral organisations and political parties has coalesced around this defining issue (so far) of the 21st century. The 2006 Stern Review concluded:

The scientific evidence is now overwhelming: climate change is a serious global threat, and it demands an urgent global response...Climate change will affect the basic elements of life for people around the world: access to water, food production, health, and the environment. Hundreds of millions of people could suffer hunger, water shortages and coastal flooding as the world warms... Because climate change is a global problem, the response to it must be international. It must be based on a shared vision of long-term goals and agreement on frameworks that will accelerate action over the next decade, and it must build on mutually reinforcing approaches at national, regional and international level.⁵

For those concerned to combat ACC, the conjunction of scientific evidence, environmentalist concern, broad public support and apparently proactive government and multilateral stances offered optimism for the future.

The rise and fall of climate change concern

These circumstances probably are sufficient to explain why attitudinal surveys of 2006 – 2007 show a peak of CC concern amongst broadly based population samples in Australia⁶. CC was a big new phenomenon: it became an issue in the federal election campaign, it dominated the news cycle, and it met the criteria for a “crisis”. This triggered a significant political response, in Australia and internationally, with various renewable energy projects and carbon pricing schemes developed or strengthened in many countries. The international culmination was the UN- sponsored Copenhagen Climate Summit in December 2009, now recorded in the annals of history as a spectacular failure in multilateral cooperation on an issue of global urgency.

The Hunter Valley Research Foundation annual environmental attitudes survey of the Hunter region for 2006 showed that 80% of respondents believed that CC would have a direct impact on their lives in the next 20 years, and 76% would be prepared to pay more for electricity generated from renewable sources. In the Lowy Institute Annual Poll on Australian Attitudes toward Global Warming, 68% of respondents in 2006 said that GW is a serious and pressing problem.

⁵ Stern N. 2006. Summary of conclusions. In Stern Review: The Economics of Climate Change, p vi. London: HM Treasury UK, http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/9/9/CLOSED_SHORT_executive_summary.pdf. Accessed 24 Mar 2010

⁶ See Department of Climate Change (Australian Government). 2009. *Climate Change Household Action Campaign Evaluation Report*: <http://www.climatechange.gov.au/about/publications/pubs/think-change-evaluation-report.pdf> Accessed 28 Sept 2009. Lowy Institute for International Policy. 2009. *The Lowy Institute Poll 2009*. Sydney: Fergus Hanson. Hunter Valley Research Foundation. 2009. *Hunter Region Environmental Attitudes Survey 2008-9, Working Paper No. 3/09*. Newcastle: HVRF, pp.1-10.

Table 1: Environmental Attitudes Surveys, Hunter Region, 2006-2009

	HVRF (Hunter Valley) 2006	HVRF (Hunter Valley) 2008-9
Direct impact of CC on yr life?	80% (agree)	64% (agree)
Willing to pay more for renewable elec?	76% (agree)	56% (agree)
Main impact of CC on economy?	17% (agree)	34% (agree)
Coal industry more positive than negative effects for region?	46% (agree)	56% (agree)

Hunter Valley Research Foundation. 2009. *Hunter Region Environmental Attitudes Survey 2008-9, Working Paper No. 3/09*. Newcastle: HVRF, pp.1-10.

Table 2: Lowy Institute Environmental Attitudes Surveys, Australia, 2006-2009

	Lowy Institute (Australia) 2006	Lowy Institute (Australia) 2009
GW a serious & pressing problem	68% (agree)	48% (agree)

Lowy Institute for International Policy. 2009. *The Lowy Institute Poll 2009*. Sydney: Fergus Hanson.

However, by 2008, reported public CC concern receded. CC no longer met popular and news cycle expectations of a “crisis” – it had been going on too long, had few visible catastrophes associated with it, and a solution was not in sight.

The 2009 results for the surveys mentioned above are telling: in the Hunter Region, in 2009, 64% of people affirmed that CC would have a direct impact on their lives in the next 20 years, compared to 80% in 2006. With regard to willingness to pay more for electricity from renewable sources, 56% agreed in 2008 compared to 76% in 2006. The Lowy national survey recorded 48% of respondents in 2009 agreeing that “global warming is a serious and pressing problem”, compared to 68% in 2006⁷.

These shifts may be associated with changing experiences of climate. In Australia, the drought that affected the country so badly in 2006 – 2007 had eased in most areas by 2008. In the Upper Hunter Valley, an area with severe water shortages, some informants in the author’s study commented that the lifting of the drought was a sign that CC was receding⁸. A view of climate as naturally cyclical, rather than progres

⁷ These surveys show marked age and gender differences. Women and younger age groups are more likely to be concerned about CC than men (or at least acknowledging the reality of anthropogenic CC). For example, in the December 2009 survey of Hunter Region residents by the Hunter Valley Research Foundation, 65.2% of women agreed that “human activities are causing significant changes to the earth’s climate” while only 54.2% of men agreed. By age, 75.5% of 18-34 year olds agreed with the statement, contrasted with 49.0% in the 65+ age group. <http://www.hvrf.com.au/pages/design/links/uploaded/HunterAtAGlance2010.pdf>. Accessed 25 Mar 2010

⁸ In the northern hemisphere, a particularly cold winter was another sort of experiential challenge to assertions of GH.

sively heating due to carbon emissions, was frequently expressed, as in the following examples from the Upper Hunter and Lake Macquarie:

“There is climate change but it is a natural change. It’s a cyclical change.”

“Climate change is a natural cycle.”

“I think that climate change is a load of crap. Mother Nature will fix things up.”

“I don’t agree with global warming, it’s a natural cycle. Volcanoes let out more CO₂ than we do.”

“Climate change is part of the natural rhythm of the earth and plants and animals have always had to adapt.”

“Waste of time. It’s nature repeating itself.”

Survey responses also suggest that people are now more sensitive to the deleterious economic effects of CC prevention or remediation. In the Hunter region surveys, 34% of respondents in 2009 agreed that “the main impacts of climate change would be on the economy”, compared to 17% in 2007. In a similar vein, the number of people agreeing with the statement “Benefits to the region of the coal industry outweigh the negative impacts” rose from 46% in 2006, to 56% in 2008. Such shifts in priorities and concerns can be related in part to the global financial crisis of 2008 – 2009, and to the filtering through of the message that putting a price on carbon is going to involve a cost for all⁹. It should be noted however that by early 2010 much of the Australian electorate was not supportive of the federal Labor government’s withdrawal of the Emissions Trading Scheme legislation, and the loss of support in the subsequent election has been partly attributed to this (Hartcher 2010). A similar expectation of government action on CC from US polls, even while self-reported concern has dropped, has been analysed by Krosnick (2010).

The scientific evidence for ACC’s palpable effects on many parts of the planet is growing apace.¹⁰ Climate change science retains its status as the dominant scientific orthodoxy despite some recent well-publicised errors and lapses of rigour. The Australian government’s Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency website devotes considerable space to debunking the “myths” against climate change.¹¹

However supporting the science is politically much easier than developing the solutions, especially where the palpability of CC is not being experienced by voters. As one Hunter Valley sceptic commented in the author’s study, “I haven’t seen sea levels rise and I live across the road from the beach.” Transnational environmental movements and concerted political commitment in many parts of the world have not

⁹ Surveys in other countries indicate similar changes in attitudes towards climate change during the period under discussion. See for example Giddens (2009), and Laboratory for Energy and the Environment, 2007 *A survey of public attitudes towards climate change and climate change mitigation technologies in the United States: Analyses of 2006 results, April 2007*. Cambridge, MA: Laboratory for Energy and the Environment. In the latter survey conducted across the USA, global warming was named as the “most important environmental problem” by 11% of people in 2003 compared to 34% in 2006.

¹⁰ See for example, IPCC Climate Change 2007: Working Group II: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability: Summary for Policymakers http://www.ipcc.ch/publications_and_data/ar4/wg2/en/spm.html Accessed 22 March 2020

¹¹ Australian Government Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency <http://www.climatechange.gov.au/government/international/global-action-facts-and-fiction/cc-action.aspx> Accessed 24 March 2010

achieved the necessary carbon reduction policies. The power of the carbon lobby and other vested interests, as well as globally pervasive market fundamentalism are clearly important in the failure of any large scale policies to achieve carbon emission reduction targets.

The flourishing of scepticism and denial

Proponents of CC scepticism and denial, in their various forms, have become a loud and visible force in the public debates about CC. Some of the response trends in the surveys cited above also suggest an actual growth of sceptical attitudes towards GW in the people surveyed, rather than merely lowered concern about the issue.

Economic explanations for the “recent attacks on the science of global warming” such as that proposed by Al Gore may well account for the decline in CC *concern* discussed above. Gore argues that:

The globalization of the economy, coupled with the outsourcing of jobs from industrial countries, has simultaneously heightened fears of job losses in the industrial world and encouraged rising expectations in emerging economies. The result? Heightened opposition, in both the industrial and developing worlds, to any constraints on the use of carbon-based fuels, which remain our principal source of energy (Gore 2010).

However this argument seems neither complete nor anthropologically satisfying to account for the burgeoning of CC *denial and scepticism* that, while often not scientifically well-informed, is far more accessible in the realm of popular culture and mass media than climate science.

In Australia, the list of prominent climate sceptics spans politics (Tony Abbott, Barnaby Joyce, Nick Minchin, Steve Fielding, Martin Ferguson); university-based science (Ian Plimer, Bill Kininmoth, Bob Carter, David Evans); journalism (Andrew Bolt, Miranda Devine, Christopher Pearson, Piers Akerman, Alan Jones); and religious leadership (Cardinal George Pell). Most do not publish in refereed journals, but their opinions are loudly heard in the public domain. Blogs, websites and social network sites, talkback radio, books and magazines are replete with their opinions. The influence of anti-CC lobby groups such as the Lavoisier Group (Ray Evans), the Climate Sense Coalition (Viv Forbes), the Australian Climate Science Coalition (Max Rheese) and the Climate Sceptics Party (Leon Ashby) has been well-documented by Guy Pearse in his “greenhouse mafia” thesis developed in his book *High and Dry* (2007), and his essay on mining in Australia, *Quarry Vision* (2009).

The range of views is diverse, from outright denial of CC to scepticism about its anthropogenic causes. Some of the assertions include: “the world has been cooling since 1998;” the world is getting warmer but we don’t know the real causes;” CC is caused by solar activity or other natural cycles, not by humans;” “there is no consensus among scientist and the IPCC is a small coterie of researchers which is using its UN power base to silence others views;” “why believe long-term predictions when meteorologists cannot even say it will rain next week;” and, “United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change negotiations are really trying to establish a ‘World Government’.”¹²

While scepticism takes many forms, it is not the dominant position of those conducting research in the climate sciences. A recent survey of climate science publications found that “97–98% of the climate researchers most actively publishing in the field surveyed here support the tenets of ACC outlined by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change” (Anderegg et al. 2010). Sceptics are loud voices but the science they draw on to make their claims is not as rigorous as exponents of ACC. Anderegg et al.’s survey also concluded “the relative climate expertise and scientific prominence of the researchers unconvinced of ACC are substantially below that of the convinced researchers” (2010). The sceptics’ successful harvesting of doubt is reflected in some of the comments of Hunter Valley residents in the author’s study:

“There are so many conflicting sides with the academics. Who should we believe?”

“I am more concerned about the terrorists than climate change: they are a real threat, whereas climate change is not a proven thing. Even the scientists can’t seem to agree. I don’t know who to believe.”

“We are getting brain washed by a few scientists. We aren’t getting the alternate view as we aren’t reading enough of the science magazines.”

The mortality message of climate change

While the simultaneous growth of CC science and CC scepticism appear to be contradictory trends, I argue that they are interdependent, and can perhaps best be illuminated by reference to Ernest Becker’s work, over thirty years ago, on terror of death as the fundamental ontological anxiety of humans, and the denial of death as the work of culture in conscious and unconscious domains.

Drawing on cultural theory and depth psychology of Freud and dissident psychoanalysts such as Otto Rank and Erich Fromm, Becker argued that the denial of death and the perpetuation of self and social collectivity is a fundamental element of all cultural worlds, whether religious or profane. He drew on evolutionary theory for the insight that: “This absolute dedication to Eros, to perseverance, is universal among

¹² For summaries of these arguments, see Cubby (2008) and the Australian Government Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency website <http://www.climatechange.gov.au/en/government/international/global-action-facts-and-fiction/cc-action.aspx> Accessed 24 March 2010

organisms, and is the essence of life on this earth..." (1975:2). The consciousness of death however is the "unique paradox of the human condition" (1975:3). At the organismic level, there is a conscious quest for endurance; culture provides the "alter-organism" that allows the symbolic transcendence of the individual life, and its endowment with meaning beyond death. Culture is, among other things, a collective means of repressing awareness of mortality and provides the framework of symbols and behaviours that counter ontological anxiety about death. Messages or events that bring thoughts about death into consciousness, in many forms, may stimulate a range of conscious and unconscious defences from denial and postponement to marginalisation of outsiders, as well as an increase in actions that enhance self-esteem by strengthening feelings of immortality.

In his posthumous work, *Escape from Evil* (1975), Becker argues that many "heroic" (i.e. immortality focussed) meaning systems contain their own undoing in the production of evil. Their behavioural correlates (such as scapegoating, war, genocide, environmental exploitation) boost self-esteem but paradoxically accelerate mortality and finitude. Becker explored the possibility of "non-destructive myths" that acknowledge objective conditions of human misery without marginalizing and dehumanizing other humans, and without the annihilation of other life forms, and nature itself.

From this perspective, the flood of information in public discourse and mass media about the threat of ACC to all forms of life on the planet constitutes a massively salient harbinger of mortality that is bound to trigger a gamut of defence mechanisms, from the consciously articulated expressions of scepticism, denial and apathy to unconsciously driven carbon-profligate behaviour, as well as embrace of ideologies and leaders who deny the science and the catastrophic consequences of ACC.¹³

Religion and climate change – Hunter Valley interviews

Becker saw religion as the age-old cultural defence of humans against the terror of mortality. Up until the Enlightenment, the control of nature and defence against mortality was based in the control of nature by ritual and sacrifice. His sources became more Eurocentric after his cross-cultural survey of religion in stateless societies.¹⁴ Christianity emerged "as a new form of democratic, universal, magical self-renewal" (1975:69) but was appropriated by royal authority. He did not see state corrupted institutionalised religions as the basis of a constructive contemporary challenge to destructive immortality strivings. These ideas raise questions about the response of contemporary religionists to the mortality threat of CC. In 2009 – 2010, in the author's study, interviews with religious and spirituality adherents in the Hunter Valley explored respondents' feelings and images of CC; relationship between religion/spirituality and nature/environment;

13 Janis Dickinson (2009) has drawn on Becker's ideas to consider climate change responses, using the theory of "terror management" that social psychologists have developed from Becker's work.

14 Becker's neglect of non-Western "world religions" such as Buddhism and Hinduism is unfortunate as their approach to death and dying may have posed more of a challenge to his theories.

the contribution of religion to adherents' understanding and interpretation of CC; and possible actions to take against CC.¹⁵

The causes of CC and its seriousness are intertwined questions in most people's thinking, and almost all respondents linked CC/GH to some form of moral decline, and also to human agency. Most also linked CC to the threat of an ending, although there was a variety of "end" scenarios, dominated by humanistic rather than apocalyptic views. A number of people commented that CC could bring about the end of humanity, but felt other species would survive and evolve. The prospect that some human cultures and communities would not survive CC because of poverty and specific geoclimatic vulnerability was also expressed by several interviewees, and often linked to a social justice agenda. Yet others discussed their concern relating to the survival/extinction of other species, and the value of ecosystems in their own right. Scientific understandings of CC catastrophe were more commonly expressed than religious understandings and the near prospect of the "tipping point" (Hansen 2005) was enunciated by several interviewees.¹⁶ Buddhist doctrine, affirming the truth of impermanence of all things, could be interpreted as an acceptance of the inevitability of CC. However the Western Buddhists interviewed emphasised the spiritual values of harm minimisation and compassion, which provide a path for action on CC.

Despite the majority of the interviewees being adherents of Christian religions (18/25), only one Pentecostal pastor cited a divine (Biblical) cause of CC, identifying it with an apocalypse precursor in the Judaeo-Christian sense. Moral critiques of contemporary society and culture (and in the case of Buddhism, humanity) are present in every case. Many of the interviewees subscribed to a prophetic discourse of moral degeneration in humans' relationship to nature/the Earth, while denying that CC was divinely caused. For example, Janice, a Quaker, commented that the Earth's decline was inevitable (because of human failings) and had to be "coped with":

I certainly have no sense that this is God bringing a punishment on us because of what we do to the Earth. We're doing it to the Earth and this is happening, and I have a sense of inevitability about it, that we have to manage it, we have to cope with it, as much as trying to slow it down and halt it.

Most of those interviewed apportioned blame variously to the systems of capitalism/consumerism, the wastefulness and greed of society and individuals, as well as poor stewardship of nature, and population increase. Capitalism and consumerism was identified by some as a secular religion, a "faith that has dominion over the earth in a dangerous way" (Lee, Quaker).

15 These interviews were undertaken as part of the Australian Research Council funded project mentioned above. There were 25 religious adherents interviewed as of March 2010 (including Anglicans, Catholics, Quakers, Western Buddhists, Pentecostal and other charismatic and fundamentalist denominations) – selected through a purposive recruitment process for semi-structured interviews.

16 The "tipping point" is the point "when the climate reaches a state such that strong amplifying feedbacks are activated by only moderate additional warming." - possibly as close as 2016. (Hansen 1 June 2007, cited in <http://www.ens-newswire.com/ens/jun2007/2007-06-01-01.asp> Accessed 8 December 2009 Accessed 22 March 2020)

The majority of the Christians interviewed could be situated along a continuum from text based theology to sacramental theology (whereby nature can be understood as a sacramental disclosure of God). Whilst fundamentalists could be situated at one extreme (text based), most people were inclined to the other end of the continuum, where “sacramental ecology” can be located. Among these adherents, there is a personal responsibility for one’s actions, as individual persons are situated as part of the environment. This is often combined with the more transcendental religious theme of stewardship, whereby one is *responsible for* the environment, which can be acted upon in a range of ways.

This sacramental element of Christian theology develops the more “immanent” (as opposed to transcendental) aspects of Christian religion, and overlaps to a considerable degree with the Buddhist ontology of interconnectedness and impermanence of all things, reincarnation, and the ethic of compassion and non-harm, which also provides a framework for personal conservationist action. The interdependence of all life is one of the primary Buddhist principles and as such was discussed by all Western Buddhists interviewed, who saw this as evidence of the environmental relevance of Buddhism as well as a framework for action.

In general, these were well-informed and concerned people who affirmed the human causes of CC, and took a moderate and humanistic (and not particularly religious) approach to strategies of amelioration and prevention. In the light of other information from the larger Hunter Valley CC study, and the survey responses summarised earlier, they are perhaps an atypical group in their acknowledgement of the seriousness of the CC reality, and their lack of defence mechanisms against it. In discussing the future, interviewees did not envisage fundamental changes in power structures but rather focused on “true democracy” where change took place from the grass roots up. Some of the actions included “localised living”, strengthening the sustainability of community life-styles, and reducing carbon footprints. Their ideals evoke Becker’s interpretation of early Christianity’s promise of “universal democratic equality” (1975:70).

These visions for change have much in common with many non-spiritual environmentalist positions. In summary, among non-Charismatic religious adherents, there is a convergence of theistic and nontheistic conservation spiritualities, which in turn converge with other ecological framings of human/nature relationships found in many forms of environmentalist thought. The ideas of Pentecostalist adherents who were interviewed are discussed below in the section on apocalyptic visions.

Consumer capitalism as an immortality system

Environmentalism and CC concern have often been proposed as a ‘secular religion’, especially by antagonists for whom this epithet is a marker of blind faith in the irrational.¹⁷ A more pervasive set of immortality beliefs than environmentalism, however, is inherent in corporate capitalism. In Australia, capitalism is not just

¹⁷ For example, see Dyson, F. 2008 “The question of global warming.” *The New York Review of Books* 55(10), June 12 <http://content.imamu.edu.sa/Scholars/it/net/dyson%202008%20nyr.pdf> Accessed 28 June 2010

the dominant economic system but also supports a powerful cultural system, with “brands” and money the symbolic media. In contrast to the drudgery of most people’s work, those who earn income can self-actualise as consumers. Consumerism engenders and sustains feelings of pleasure and future security through linking self-identity with values and practices of acquisition, affluence, endless exploitation of nature, novelty, and perpetual renewal. It is arguably the dominant immortality project (in Becker’s terms) of contemporary Australian society and inflects all others, such as sport. In defending against the terrors of the world, Becker argues that the person coming to adulthood, in any social group, “learns to embed himself [sic] in other-power, both of concrete persons and of things and cultural commands” (1973: 23). The other-power of the things that are consumer commodities is highly elaborated in contemporary capitalist societies through brands and commodity proliferation. Celebrities, not deities, religious or political leaders, are the personages who are worshipped as they manifest the core cultural values.

Some seven decades earlier, William James, in his lectures on “The Sick Soul” in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) articulated the phenomenological essence of secularist anomie and its fragility as an immortality system:

This sadness lies at the heart of every merely positivistic, agnostic, or naturalistic scheme of philosophy. Let sanguine healthy-mindedness do its best with its strange power of living in the moment and ignoring and forgetting, still the evil background is really there to be thought of, and the skull will grin in at the banquet (119).

But in the 21st century, in a way of life that celebrates living in the moment, ignoring and forgetting, who is allowed to feel unhappy or worried, to acknowledge the sadness “at the heart”? Modern life seems pervaded by affluence, security, satedness, and comfort. Levels of ease have risen exponentially compared to earlier eras. Richard Heinberg observes:

If we were to add together the power of all the fuel-fed machines that we rely on to light and heat our homes, transport us, and otherwise keep us in the style to which we have become accustomed, and then compare that total with the amount of power that can be generated by the human body, we would find each American has the equivalent of over 150 ‘energy slaves’ working for us twenty-four hours a day.¹⁸

Worldwatch Institute recently reported that the average American consumes more than his or her weight in products each day.¹⁹ As summarised by *The Guardian Weekly*:

In the last decade, consumption of goods and services rose 28% to \$30.5 trillion. The consumer culture is no longer a mostly American habit. Over the last 50 years, excess has been adopted as a symbol of success in developing countries from Brazil to India to China, the [Worldwatch] report said..... Such trends were not a result of economic growth, the report said, but of deliberate efforts by businesses to win over consumers. Products such as the hamburger and bottled water are now commonplace (22 January 2010, 10).

¹⁸ Richard Heinberg, 2003. *The Party’s Over*. Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 31, cited in Giddens 2009, 36.

¹⁹ Worldwatch Institute 2010 *State of the World Report 2010* <http://www.worldwatch.org/sow10> Accessed 22nd March 2010

Just as CC threat has spawned scepticism, the global financial crisis has strengthened the cultural production of happiness. In the US, where economic stress for many is severe, there is a plethora of new happiness books to assist those dealing with bankruptcy, negative mortgage equity, homelessness and unemployment. Gretchen Rubin's *The Happiness Project* recently hit number 1 on the *New York Times* self-help bestseller list. "The spring book lists are teeming with beaming" reports the *New York Times* (10).

In considering the efficacy of these defence mechanisms against the threat of annihilation, it is worth remembering a Freudian insight about repression: it is "not simply a negative force opposing life energies; it lives on life energies and uses them creatively" (as expressed by Becker, 1973, 21). Intimations of mortality are resisted and defended against in a variety of ways. An anthropological question thus arises: What symbolic system in Australia today can compete with or replace the life-affirming messages of consumer capitalism? The "no growth" prescriptions of many environmental activists and CC policymakers are all too readily experienced as death message solutions to an already highly unpalatable end of world scenario. As "growth" in many contexts equals "life," the unconscious resistance to these ideas is considerable.

Apocalyptic visions and new worlds

Another cultural meaning system introduced at the beginning of this paper is that associated with ideas of Apocalypse. The term derives from the Greek *apokalupsis* (to uncover or unveil) and there is a literary genre of early Jewish and Christian writing called "apocalypse" that treats of God's revelations to humans.²⁰ In the Bible, the Book of Revelation (also known as Apocalypse) specifically prophesies the end of the world associated with God's judgment and salvation of the faithful. In colloquial English, "apocalypse" can refer to any catastrophic event especially those that feature elements of large scale death and destruction reminiscent of the Biblical imagery. Climate change, holding the seeds of such annihilation, is often expressed as an imminent apocalypse.

The Christian faiths most closely associated with Apocalypse belief are Pentecostalism and its variants in the Charismatic movement. Pentecostalism and other Charismatic denominations are growing in many parts of the world, and comprise the second largest grouping of Christian faiths internationally with about 500 million followers in 1999 (Poloma 2000). In Australia since 1996, the fastest-growing Australian Christian denomination is Pentecostal, increasing by 26% (to around 220,000) by the 2006 census.²¹

The key features of Pentecostalism are its "experientially God-centered" world view, with the Holy Spirit

²⁰ The New Oxford Annotated Bible, 2007. Augmented Third Edition, New Revised Standard Version, ed. Michael D. Coogan. Oxford University Press, New Testament Introduction to Revelation of John, p. 420.

²¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/7d12b0f6763c78caca257061001cc588/6ef598989db79931ca257306000d52b4> Accessed 20 March 2010

connecting all worldly phenomena; literal Biblicism (like other Fundamentalist groups) and a view of the Bible as a living book in which “the Holy Spirit is always active;” experiential knowledge through the direct encounter with God; an anti-bureaucratic church structure; and end time beliefs (Poloma 2000).

In the author’s Hunter Valley study, several Pentecostalist Christians were interviewed, and their views are summarised briefly. Ray, a Pentecostal minister, viewed CC as due to the will of God, and scripturally preordained as an end time precursor:

I believe, we’re facing climate change around the world, which is prefacing the end time events of the scriptures. We’re seeing an increase in floods, we’re seeing an increase in mudslides, we’re seeing an increase in earthquakes, we’re seeing an increase in famine and fires. Every aspect of climate is set in the records. Um, now if we analyse that according to the scriptures, it would indicate that.

For Ray, CC goes hand in hand with the moral decline of society. He stressed God was allowing the decline, not forcing it, hence the responsibility was with people to choose Christ:

So God is simply allowing him [Satan] to degenerate the world, in the basis that, in the end, I mean, our time on earth is [clicking fingers] is but a vapour to eternity. Eternity is a long time. Now the Bible says there are only two places in eternity, that’s heaven and hell. So if we haven’t chosen Christ, if we haven’t chosen heaven through Christ, then in actual fact, we’ve chosen hell. They are pretty serious consequences. Now you can reason hell any way you like, but if you read the word, it’s a hell of a place. It is exactly as the Bible describes it. How do I know? We are so close to end time, that God is allowing people to go to hell, and check it out.

Others, who also preached the scripturally ordained end time, did not necessarily see CC as part of it. Vince (a Seventh Day Adventist) stated that as a Creationist he believed creation had some purpose, but that was in God’s hands. He did not know whether CC had anything to do with end-time events, and that did not stop him from trying to do something about it. He favoured a science-based discourse of the “tipping point” over a religious explanation.

They talk about that tipping point where, if we go beyond that, that it’s going to be difficult if not impossible to then try and reverse that trend toward global warming. So, but, yeah I don’t believe that the end of the world is nigh. But at the same time I think that the governments around the world should have begun acting some time ago, and if they haven’t they need to get on with it pronto.

Denial of CC is also compatible with Pentecostalist beliefs, as articulated by Will, another person interviewed. Will was keen to discuss in detail the East Anglia email hacking and 4th IPCC report errors. He said that he “[didn’t] believe the science was there”, “the earth has been on a normal warming cycle” and “most... of the world’s scientist’s don’t believe in global warming.” He stated that “there’s a fair bit or arrogance in man to think he can fix the future of the world”, and “God will decide when the world ends”. He didn’t think Christians were particularly protected from disasters in this world.

Will gave expression to another important strand of Christian fundamentalist thinking: the use of CC as a

pretext for forming a World Government. “The Bible talks about one World Government, it talks about the rise of the anti-Christ. I believe we’re on the threshold of something like that.” For Will, evidence included the fact that the Copenhagen summit already had a draft agreement with “the appointment of this committee, to oversee, and indeed bring down punishments, upon companies and countries that they don’t rule over, and taxing them, and even imprisonment on people who aren’t complying with their message.” In this understanding, CC is not just a negative message about the entropy of the planet, but a challenge to the community of believers and their democratic rights. It is an instrument of the anti-Christ, and therefore a threat to the prospect of a post-Apocalypse afterlife for the born-again faithful.

The challenge of CC for fundamentalist Christians relates to their belief that redemption is based on faith not works. This is at the other end of the spectrum to the sacramental theologies of the other religious adherents whose interviews were discussed above. The role of pastors is to minister to increasing numbers of people in order to provide them with the opportunity of salvation, whether or not CC is implicated in end of world events.

It appears paradoxical that the CC apocalypse meets with strong resistance from the Christian faiths of the Apocalypse. But not all Apocalypses are the same. Unlike the CC scenario, the Pentecostalist Apocalypse is only a prelude to another life – the end of “first things”, and the path for a “new heaven and new earth.” It is not a final ending for the faithful, who will be born again. In this, it shares many features with other immortality systems, and with earlier forms of Christianity, wherein Becker noted “the individual could fashion his own salvation, independent of any earthly authority” (1975:69).

New Jerusalem in outer space

The tenets of Pentecostalism find a parallel in the profane realms of entrepreneurship and science, where there is an efflorescence of movements that prophesy apocalyptic ends but also a new life of a quite different order away from the perils of a heated Earth. For example, the World Economic forum in Davos, Switzerland, in January 2010 featured a panel on “Life on other planets” with speakers exploring the possibilities of finding new habitable worlds to support business in outer space (Capeto 2010). The star speaker was Dimitar Sasselov, director of Harvard University’s Origins of Life Initiative Project.²² Sasselov discovered the exosolar world OGLE-TR-56b (that he unofficially named after his wife, Sheila). He said:

It’s feasible that we’ll meet other sentient life forms and conduct commerce with them.” ... “We don’t now have the technology to physically travel outside our solar system for such an exchange to take place, but we are like Columbus centuries ago, learning fast how to get somewhere few think possible” (quoted in Capeto 2010).

²² Harvard University *Origins of Life Initiative* <http://origins.harvard.edu/index.html> Accessed 28 June 2010

Sasselov says he hopes to stir realization that research about other planets can “redefine life as we know it” and eventually create a market in the Milky Way and beyond.

These self-styled culture heroes frequently compare their endeavours to those of Christopher Columbus, bringing to mind Becker’s interrogation of the social forms of heroic transcendence of mortality in each human epoch (1975:154).²³ Another panelist, Brad Durham, said:

Businessmen once thought Columbus was ridiculous, but he was the adventure capitalist who helped create globalization. [He continued:] People in my field pay serious attention to Sasselov’s work because what’s knowable in our business can be thrown out the window real fast. It’s likely going to take many lifetimes before we can take advantage of outer space as an emerging market, but it’s best not to be hobbled by the lack of imagination on Earth(quoted in Capeto 2010).

Physicist David Livingston has developed a *Code of Ethics for Off-Earth Commerce* to guide humankind’s conduct in their contacts with aliens. He says:

We’re committed to ensuring a free-market economy off- Earth... Treat outer space with respect, concern and thoughtful deliberation, regardless of the presence or absence of life forms (quoted in Capeto 2010).

The Washington D.C. based National Space Society, less mindful of off-Earth life forms, has as its Vision Statement “People living and working in thriving communities beyond the Earth, and the use of the vast resources of space for the dramatic betterment of humanity.”²⁴

There are many differences between Christian fundamentalists and market fundamentalists, but they are similar in their commitment to immortality ideologies that seek new worlds, whether New Jerusalems or exoplanets, beyond the present Earth, when Earth is used up either by the fires of the Apocalypse or exploitation, resource depletion and GH.

Conclusion

In *Escape from Evil*, Becker wrote: “...cultures are fundamentally and basically styles of heroic death denial” (p. 125). The heroism consists in the many types of cultural projects that allow individuals to be recognised and valued within symbolic domains that reference immortality. The paradox of culture is the capacity for immortality projects to generate evil. Becker pointed, among other things, to genocide, war, and environmental devastation. With regard to the last, he said:

...the hope of Faustian man was that he would discover Truth, obtain the secret to the workings

23 Most of the off-Earth visionaries are men, like the explorers of former eras, inviting a gender analysis of forms of heroic transcendence which is beyond the scope of this paper (and which Becker also neglected).

24 National Space Society <http://www.nss.org/> Accessed 28 June 2010

of nature, and so assure the complete triumph of man over nature, his apotheosis on earth. Not only has Faustian man failed to do this, but he is actually ruining the very theater of his own immortality with his own poisonous and madly driven works; once he had eclipsed the sacred dimension, he had only the earth left to testify to the value of his life. This is why, I think, even one-dimensional politicians and bureaucrats, in both capitalist and communist countries, are becoming anxious about environmental collapse; the earth is the only area of self-perpetuation in the new ideology of Faustian man (EE, 1975, p. 72).

I have suggested that there are still salient immortality projects, both religious and secular, that envision human self-perpetuation beyond this life and this earth. Defensive responses, conscious and unconscious, to the encroaching reality of ACC can be traced to these elemental human projects. In considering these projects, we must include the Faustian bargain many contemporary societies have struck with nature to achieve transcendence through material wealth and consumer satisfactions. Whether the leaders and citizens of the Earth's nations are able to extricate themselves from this bargain is a problem that requires a comparative cultural analysis of humanity's visionings of immortality, death and survival to facilitate deeper insights into the politics and knowledge of CC. Immortality ideologies of one form or another seem inescapable in human existence. It is imperative that some are harnessed productively to transform future prospects for the planet, while still nourishing our fragile human hopes of eternity.

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