

The peak oil society

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If I donate all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, but do not have love, I gain nothing. [1 Cor. 13:3, HCSB]

Assume we have passed the point where half the planetary oil has been used. With billions of people now using oil, the remaining half will last nowhere near as long as the 150 years it took to use the first half.

The first signs of trouble are inexorably rising oil prices, slowly at first, then accelerating. Food prices follow as transportation costs bite. Then as various suppliers are forced out of the market, some lines become harder to get. We cope while this problem is limited to exotic delicacies; but when basics start to become unavailable, we begin to worry.

As this new world creeps up on us, air and car travel drift into becoming occasional luxuries. People are forced onto mass transit for work, and before long airlines have been radically rationalised, and private car travel becomes a social sin. Supply of other basics—clothing, tools, spare parts—become random and patchy. Unemployment soars as some oil-dependent producers and their onsellors become unviable.

Meanwhile, governments wrestle with the problem of food distribution. The astronomical ‘food density’ required by cities and made possible by oil is harder to continue by other means. More distribution centres are connected to rail; electrical and biofuel powered vehicles bring it into towns and suburbs; people walk to stores; but these massive changes do not come easily, and the population begins to grow restless.

What next?

This troubling scenario is not high on most of our radars at the moment, but is likely to become a topic of conversation in the near future. Two recent documentaries, aired on SBS and ABC in April and May, indicate the spread of this thinking beyond fringe eco-nutters toward the mainstream.

It is not easy to tell whose facts are right in the peak oil discussion. Some argue that the world’s largest oil reservoir, in Saudi Arabia, has already passed the 50% point and that extraction is getting harder. Others are optimistic: technology will open up new wells that become economically viable once more accessible sources have been exhausted. But all agree that oil is ultimately a finite resource, even if an abundant one.

Time reports that U.S. oil companies are scaling back plant expansion plans because of a Presidential push to reduce oil dependency by increasing the contribution of ‘biofuels’, such as corn-based ethanol, by 2015. Peak oil advocates argue that this account is spin: whether or not biofuels are developed, oil production is set to decrease due to the limitations of geology, and current exploration by oil companies in inhospitable, expensive terrains suggests that the days of easy extraction are passing.

In a related discussion, critics of biofuels highlight its limitation as a replacement fuel source, and lament the prospect of corn-based ethanol production driving up international corn prices at the expense of 2 billion of the world’s poorest people. This criticism is blunted if farm wastes become the basis for biofuel production; but even then, it seems unlikely that biofuel production could match current oil supply.

These are complex discussions and the purpose of this briefing is not to come down on any one side. Rather, we want simply to examine the ‘what next?’ question. What comes next, if we have arrived at peak oil? Whether or not oil supply is diminishing, what we certainly face is the problem of many more worried people, whose minds freewheel on this story of new apocalypse, with anxieties about how to feed their children and what will become of them. And as we observed in our last briefing, once children get wind of this story of doom, they will again become the silent worriers.

We want to tell a different story here—a theological story, that can bring hope. But we will take a little longer than usual to tell it.

One response to peak oil becomes instantly apparent in a quick web search. This is the ‘survivalist’ response. Women who are worried about the fate of their children have already moved to farms and are training themselves in self-sufficiency: shoe-making, preserving, poultry-farming—all the skills of their great grandmothers. Men are searching for dependable, long-term ways to generate power that are future-proofed from the inevitable failure of spare part supply. There is talk of stockpiling gasoline in jerry-cans for the final flight to rural retreats, since no city address will have the food density required for survival.

This solution is mythical at an obvious level. These survivalists seem to imagine roaring their equipment-laden SUVs across deserted highways to utility-packed retreats, to live out endless days in a kind of peak-oil tree-change. Of course the scenario is ridiculous. If a society is depoliticized to the extent that we need to flee to our back-up farm, then entire cities will be in meltdown, the SUV will not make it out of the garage, and the rural retreat will have been looted several times as hundreds of thousands flee the cities ahead of us.

But this kind of mind-game is mythical at a more fundamental level. It is simply a projection of a favourite modern Western myth that began with Rousseau’s view of humanity as fundamentally ‘noble savages’. We transfer our self-image as noble lone consumers, individuals born to be free rational shoppers, from the mall to the farm. Now, we command what we consume. Then, we will nobly survive upon our pre-bought stockpiles. The fact that a family is in tow, or that the stockpiles rely upon the efforts of thousands of others, doesn’t really change the outline of the story: like the proverbial Amazon woman, the survivalist mother does battle with the elements in the same way she now does battle with car-parks, lousy bosses, and physical exhaustion.

In this myth, interdependency with others is a problem to be overcome.

If we ponder the myth for long, its failures become apparent—particularly in the U.S., a country with two hundred million guns dispersed among its three hundred million people. In an uncanny parallel to the way the myth of society developed in seventeenth-century Western thought, before long we invent the idea of a ‘social contract’. In Thomas Hobbes’ version, human life is ‘nasty brutish and short’ until such time as we learn to cooperate. The only way to avoid death sprawled next to a burning SUV is, according to Hobbes, for us to compact together to protect each other from each other. We do this by giving some leader the power to restrain and punish.

In this myth, interdependency upon others is at best a necessary means to an end. We do it because we have to. It becomes the only way to consume our stockpile in peace.

According to Christian thought, both of these myths have failed at the most basic level of description. For what is humanity? In Christian thought, to be us is to be an *us*: interdependency is not just helpful, it is who we are. We are social beings. ‘Society’ is not ‘convenient’—it is what we are made for.

Therefore the solution to peak oil can and will only ever be a social one, and in pursuing a social solution, we rediscover the central truth about human anthropology: that we need each other. Of course never has that fact been more evident than in the modern city, where everything we do is utterly dependent upon an intricate network of interacting, communicating, transacting, sharing, trusting, participating, relating, cooperating, dealing with and relying upon others. (Our bizarrely clever feat amid all this is that we go through it all, perhaps for decades, seriously believing ourselves to be ‘a loner’, ‘my own man’, ‘a self-made person’, ‘an independent person’, ‘free’, or whatever deluded label we like to put upon our supposed autonomy.)

Once we realise that the solution is social, some aspects of the supposed peak-oil ‘crisis’ can be seen more clearly. For there is a sense in which the absence of oil only has one real effect. It will give back to us a proper sense of our creaturely limitation, as little embodied animals who can only walk a few kilometres a day. Our spatial limitations have always been what give us a sense of a ‘place’, or neighbourhood, in which we live. Oil has temporarily tricked us, making these constraints hidden in plain sight, deluding us into thinking that we can soar unencumbered like the angels just because someone can fly us to Phuket or because we can drive interstate. The absence of oil will only throw us back onto what was always the case, and what still remains the case for the majority of the world’s population: we are a people who dwell in neighbourhoods, villages and towns, making the best of interdependency with others in the same place. We cannot abstract away our createdness forever.

Seeing this truth about ourselves might start to generate new policy ideas. These can really only be worked out in practice, for there are limits to what imagination and the words you are reading can achieve. But neighbours might develop small economies that rely upon renewable energy and food sources, and local councils might assist neighbours to rip up streets and start growing things together. In places where there is a risk of food insecurity, governments might assist people to relocate along existing rail lines, with some workers able to use the internet for their business and others finding work sustaining these new communities. Electricity, whatever its post-greenhouse form, will take up some of the energy slack, and energy efficiency will be augmented by human-powered options. (Think of all the energy wasted in gyms every day.)

Society can do this. Indeed it can start now. When men and women start writing polite letters to politicians asking what policies exist for the change to a post-oil-dependent society, the process of orderly change has begun. Some are already thinking about this ‘powerdown alternative’, where we do not just consume less but strategically re-position society to prepare for ‘energy descent’.

‘Imagine what could be achieved if the resources being ear-marked for a new generation of nuclear were to go into localisation programs, education, re-skilling for a low-energy world, and so on,’ writes Graham Strouts. Several UK ‘transition town’ communities are already experimenting with responses to the ‘twin challenges’ of peak oil and climate change, hoping to ‘unleash their own collective genius and embark on an imaginative and practical range of connected initiatives.’

Churches will play a key role in the peak-oil society. At their best, they exist among a wider society and show what is possible when people love one another:

Now all the believers were together and had everything in common. So they sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as anyone had a need. And every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple complex, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to them those who were being saved. [Acts 2:44-47, HCSB]

Even today, churches do this—perhaps not with the same abandon of ownership, but arguably with the same heart. As God continues his extraordinary work of saving people from myths of independent autonomy, people begin again to see what is hidden in plain sight: each other. Then love sets in, and a society is born. Churches at their best show how human society can become restored to what God ‘dreams of’ for it.

The peak-oil church can do what churches have often done, existing within a wider society and showing onlookers how not to panic and how to find interdependence. These churches will gather people, share resources, and discover and organise gifts and skills. They will support and encourage police to stay at their posts, and exhort governments neither to despair nor to resort to draconian rule or resource-wars. The Christian gospel becomes the new untapped reservoir on how to *be* a society.

This same gospel also shows that *life goes on*: there is no apocalypse, not really, until God declares it. Until then he patiently waits for people to repent, to thank him for his goodness, and to trust in his Son. That is how it has ever been, and society has no other business than to be an interdependent community. The gospel points forward to the only place where society can ever find true fulfilment: ‘the kingdom of heaven’.

‘If I donate all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, but do not have love, I gain nothing.’ The noble survivor, for all her good intentions, misses the point of her true calling if she fails to remember that she is called to love her neighbour and help her. So also the man in her life, his children, their friends, the police officer over the fence, the nurses down the road, the stockbrokers upstairs, the theology students, the gay couple, the homeless guy, the Bhuddhist and the liberal atheist, the eco-warrior, and whoever else lives nearby ... God’s call is for all of us. Of course some will battle to believe and to find their identity in Jesus while he forms his church in a place; but even before they do, the peak-oil society can settle for helping one other.

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