

WHERE IS ALBERTA GOING?

John Hiemstra: *Prosperity and the Gospel: asking liberating questions in the face of paradoxes*

It's great to be among friends, people who are committed to doing justice and willing to spend a Saturday talking about where Alberta is heading.

This morning we listened to Mark Anielski who helped us work through the notion of "social and economic indicators" and how we need to develop better ones that tell us more truth about what is going on in Alberta and the world today.

How does the Gospel relate to these questions? How does the Gospel relate to our prosperity and where Alberta is heading? Does the faith have any relevance for our problems? And if it does, how?

I'm going to sketch out a couple of ways that I see Christians relating their faith to the public square, then offer a bit of CPJ's approach. I'll sketch out some implications for the current discussion of "where is affluent Alberta heading?"

The first approach is what I call **the detached approach.** This position assumes religion is essentially a private matter. If Christianity has anything to say to the future of Alberta, it would be **Get saved, get converted, so you have eternal life beyond Alberta, sometime in the future.** Public life is a messy affair. Christians should engage in it to achieve the necessary support for life. But the Gospel really has no relevance here.

I like the emphasis on conversion and the idea that we need fundamental change in our life. But the irrelevance issue bothers all of us.

I call the second approach **the moralistic approach.** This one is a lot more common in Christian circles. It says, **Our faith is relevant to public matters, but only as morality. That's important, but is it enough? Here's how it works out. The actual morality which we emphasize (or this position emphasizes) can be polarized into what we call the **left** and the **right** positions -- in my view, a false dichotomy from the point of view of the Gospel. I think many of us would agree to that. Yet we often fall into that trap.**

Let me sketch out what happens here, in terms of poverty. The more conservative churches tend to say, **You're poor because of your moral failure.** The solution is obvious: **You ought to pick up your individual responsibilities; start acting responsibly. That's the primary problem: a moral failure. That's why so many people are poor.** Secular people use this argument, but many Christians also use it.

On the more liberal Christian side, we often also use moralistic approaches. **Society has morally failed the poor. We're not distributing its wealth justly. The state should act morally through**

social justice; give more money to the poor and help remove risks from their lives and our lives.®

I agree with both positions. Individual responsibility is good and the state has responsibilities. But the one-sided emphasis is problematic. Two other points are also problematic.

First, it misses the deeper religious reality of what's going on in our culture today, the deeper religious dynamics. In the wake of the terrorist bombing we are quite aware that sin and evil are present. We see it in a very existential way. We see that sin and evil are also present in the economic and political system of the world. Is Jesus just a good, moral example **B** whether in individual responsibility or collective responsibility? I think something deeper is going on.

The second thing missing is the textured social reality in which responsibility happens. Responsibility is taken up in social locations, in institutions, in social relations. It's not abstractly individual.

Now I'll jump to a third approach, which I call the **A**paradox® approach. This approach focuses on the outstanding paradoxes in our social, economic and political life. Then I'll move on to expose not only moral dilemmas, but the fundamentally religious questions at stake.

Let's look at Alberta. Alberta is a rich society. We have the Alberta Advantage; maybe we should rename that the Alberta Paradox. The paradox is, we're rich. Economic growth is high and stock markets were great, at least until 10 days ago. Markets are climbing. Oil prices are strong. Unemployment in Edmonton is the lowest in Alberta and in Canada. The economy appears sound. But Mark showed up that if you scratch beneath the surface of these fiscal/economic indicators there are lots of social problems and they come in paradoxical form.

We should have expected poverty to disappear. We live in probably the most wealthy culture that has ever existed on the earth. We have huge budget surpluses and massive growth. The tide surely must have lifted all the boats up by now. But it hasn't. Poverty persists. And not only poverty; the complications are bigger. Increased wealth is becoming evident in impoverishing our lives. Increased stress and lack of time are leading to social breakdown. Social relations in institutions are under severe stress. Furthermore, government funding for care agencies is down, but people are less able and less willing to spend time on others. We're richer, but our time is less abundant. It's becoming scarce. That means that Albertans live longer, but more and more elderly are living isolated and lonely lives. We don't have time for each other. The family is severely stressed, with little time to care for and nurture one another and children. Marriages are under stress. Loneliness and alienation amongst youth keep showing up. We are rushed and stressed, while child, spousal and elder abuse is common.

Why, in a wealthy society, do these things get worse?

Similar things can be said about science and technology. It's ironic that we have growing mastery of the world through science and technology and at the same time burgeoning environmental problems. It doesn't make sense. We should be conquering them -- global warming, depletion of ozone **B** you know the litany. If everybody on earth lived like average

Canadians, Environment Canada says, we would need two additional earths to sustain us. We're in deep trouble. Progress is not what it used to be. Progress is, in fact, a paradox.

What do these paradoxes teach us? As a Christian, I believe that contradictions point us to a deeper religious problem. Christians confess that in spite of our sins, our brokenness and our suffering, this is God's creation, which he said is *A*very good.[@] *A* God so loved the world, he gave his son to save us.[@] He loved it so much. The goodness of creation, even in its fallen state, is evident in its coherence. The way it fits together; its unity. And that is, in my view, a religious thing. St. Paul says in his letter to the Colossians: *A*For by Jesus Christ all things were created. Things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities, all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together.[@] There's a fundamental unity in creation that coheres in Christ. Nature and culture, plants, birds, paintings, business, politics, ought to hang together in some kind of harmonious, balanced whole. They hang together in their source in Christ and in their redemption in Christ.

However, when people become obsessed with achieving their own goals--material prosperity, security from terrorists, domination of nature -- we are tempted to look to the means available in God's creation to deliver the goods. The market will make us rich. Our weapons and security systems will keep us secure. The state will unify our nation. When we start acting like God is dead, we look to these means to save us, to create plenty, to provide meaning.

I call that idolatry, a category that's being rediscovered. Recent documents by the Canadian Ecumenical Jubilee Initiative and the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada talk about the idolatry of the market. Across the spectrum people are again beginning to say, we need to see the religious dynamics in the public realm and in the market, in economics. Idolatry provides a false centre to created life and breaks the unity in Christ. When unity is lost, paradoxes emerge. When we put a false unity in creation, all kinds of contradictions emerge. They produce pain and suffering, entrapment and war. So our single-minded pursuit of prosperity brings all sorts of problems.

We see this in Alberta's history. You can trace it back through the Lougheed days and its emphasis on economic growth as the means to achieving well being. When Ralph Klein came on board in '93, he said we've got a deficit problem. What's the solution? Same thing: economic growth. Today, the messy deficit cutting is done. Surpluses are rolling in, the debt is almost paid, the Heritage Fund is almost up to \$13 billion. The Alberta Government has decided to consult Albertans through a "Future Summit." But our social and environmental problems persist. What do they point to? More economic growth. We realize now that this is sort of an idolatry. We feel powerless about it. These things seem inevitable.

Aren't we trapped in the global economic system? Can we really live another way? The Bible tells us, yes, indeed, this is the result of idolatry. Psalm 135 says: "The idols of a nation are silver and gold, made by the hands of people. They have mouths, but can't speak; eyes, but they can't see; have ears, but cannot hear, nor is there breath in their mouth. They're powerless. Then it says, *A*Those who make them will be like them. And so will all those who trust in them.[@] You become powerless, entrapped if you trust in idols.

This is where the Gospel message comes in. The cross of Christ is not just personal salvation, it's cosmic, creation-wide salvation. Christ overcame, St. Paul tells us, the powers, the authorities, and principalities and made a spectacle of them on the cross (Col 2:15). In Christ, God made a decisive move against sin, poverty, warmongering, idolatry and suffering. He has secured our future. We don't have to do it. That's the fundamental message of the Gospel. Our hope ought to be that God would unite his saving act to ours. What we do can fit in with what God is doing.

Our first step then, is to break with the hypnosis of the dream that increased prosperity can produce happiness. We need to snap out of it and say, "Enough!" Our most central act ought to be one of repentance, a religious term. Repentance and confession that we've always wanted too much. We do not need, nor should we want, more and more material things. We want shalom in our lives. That means responsible production, responsible consumption, sharing our blessings with the poor, creating good jobs, meaningful work, cleaning up the environment, protecting the wilderness, transferring income to poor countries, and putting in place the rule of law internationally to protect innocent civilians and refugees.

Yet we cannot simply say "enough" as abstract individuals. We should say "enough" as communities, as people who are parents, consumers, workers, who are in all kinds of relationships and contexts. What does it mean in your business to say "enough"? What does it mean on your farm? What does it mean as a teacher? What does it mean in your household? It's not just the state's job, nor is it just the individuals job. It's a differentiated responsibility. We all have multiple ways of dealing with that question.

The state also has its important function to fulfill its God-given role. It must make sure that people have the access to the resources to fulfill their callings **B** whether you're poor, or whether you've been marginalized by bad business practices, or pushed in the corner as a union, or de-licensed as a school. The state has to step in to make sure that there's public justice between people, and public provision for what is needed.

A vision for the future in Alberta has to include these six points:

(1) Confession. As Christians, we need to confess where we've gone wrong publicly, repent and live differently.

(2) We need to initiate a society-wide discussion on "enough" with our neighbours, who may not share our confession. How can a consumerist society be converted to a way of life based on "enough"— in our labour negotiations, our corporate profits, our government budgets, our school budgets, our family budgets?

(3) We need to re-invigorate personal accountability alongside personal freedom. That is, give up time for one another; to **A**be there for them[@]as Jean Vanier showed so outstandingly in his ministry at L'Arche.

(4) We need to understand responsibilities in a differentiated way. The multiple places in which

we have responsibility need to be supported and encouraged.

(5) We don't need to get rid of the market, but we have to call it to responsibility. Maybe the best term for the current market, using biblical language, is that it's a *licitious* market. It involves the licence to do whatever you want. Yet freedom is really the room, the space, to be responsible. We need a free, responsible market.

(6) We need to get the state back on line to its original and intrinsic meaning.

I'll close with a final reflection from Oscar Romero, the martyred Archbishop of El Salvador:

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts. It is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that should be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No conversion brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we're about: We plant seeds that one day will grow, or maybe die. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something and to do it well. It may be incomplete, but it's a beginning, a step along the way. An opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the results, but that is the difference between the master builder and us workers. We are workers, not master builders. We are ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future that is not our own.

John Hiemstra teaches political studies at King's University College in Edmonton.