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Economic fundamentalism tells us that our ever increasing standard of living is the best measure of happiness and wellbeing. In today's society, it is heretical to suggest that the usual measures of economic success, such as the single-minded focus on Gross Domestic Product (GDP), no longer serve to assess a country's prosperity.

Certainly, lifting people out of abject poverty greatly improves their quality of life, and improvement in basic material wealth has proved very effective in doing that. But beyond a certain point, increases in material wealth don't produce increases in wellbeing. In Australia and other materially wealthy countries, the “diseases of affluence” - stress, overwork, depression, loss of community, etc – are increasing despite an ever higher rate of consumption.

The former World Bank chief economist, Joseph Stiglitz and other prominent economists have highlighted the problems with the GDP. It fails to take into account the costs of environmental damage and resource depletion, but adds the costs of cleaning up after natural disasters or pollution as a positive contribution. It ignores the value of leisure time, unpaid work and community, and the negative effect of increasing inequality in wealth distribution. It places no value on sustainability. And it fails to measure how much our unsustainable economic model is borrowing from the future.

It also fails to give any indication of the quality of life experienced by the country in question. For instance, **a recent world map of nominal GDP** by country dated June 2013 shows Australia's GDP to be on par with that of India, but below that of Russia, while the USA outdid the rest of the world. Few Australians would agree that the quality of life in the US was superior to our own for most citizens.

What we measure affects what we do. If we measure the wrong things, we will strive for the wrong things.

In a blog on ABC's **The Drum website** (16 Jan 2014), Tim Dean asked “*What makes life worth living? Think about that for a moment. Try to pick out at least three things that give you genuine fulfilment, things you structure your life around so you can experience them as much as possible.*”

“Some responses might include spending time with family and friends, being in a loving relationship, contributing to your community, having a rewarding job, enjoying nature, maintaining good health, having time for leisure, feeling secure, maybe even seeking wisdom - or simply finding happiness”

He concluded, *“Altering our national accounting method might seem pretty trivial, but I can assure you that just switching from GDP to a more enlightened alternative would have dramatic ramifications on how we weigh our national priorities, how we structure public policy, and even how we choose to work”*

The tiny Himalayan state of **Bhutan chose another way** of measuring the country's wellbeing. *“Since 1971, the country has rejected GDP as the best way to measure progress. In its place, it has championed a new approach to development, which measures prosperity through formal principles of gross national happiness (GNH) and the spiritual, physical, social and environmental health of its citizens and natural environment.*

For the past three decades, this belief that wellbeing should take preference over material growth has remained a global oddity. Now, in a world beset by collapsing financial systems, gross inequity and wide-scale environmental destruction, this tiny Buddhist state's approach is attracting a lot of interest.”

Christianity teaches us that our fulfilment and happiness are to be found in our relationship with God and out of that, with each other. As faith communities, we should be models of the values we claim to believe in. But we are also part of the Australian culture and may not realise that some of the most basic assumptions we have been taught about how the world works can be questioned.

Jesus said that we cannot serve both God and riches. (Matt 6:24) Is that evident in how we live, the consumer choices we make, and what we want our government to focus on?

American theologian John B. Cobb argues that the *“economism that rules the West and through it much of the East”* is in direct opposition to traditional Christian doctrine. He says that *“Western society is organized in the service of wealth”* and thus wealth has triumphed over God in the West.

Yet it is clear by now to most of us that continuing to consume in such a profligate manner the resources God has given us to enjoy and share fairly is wrong. Even without the religious imperative, people increasingly are concerned that we are on the wrong path and “business as usual” is neither possible nor desirable and we need to redefine wellbeing and prosperity.

Back in 2007, **a world-wide survey** of 1,000 respondents in 10 countries were asked which of two points of view was closest to their own:

- that governments should measure national progress using money-based statistics because economic growth is the most important focus for the country; or
- that health, social and environmental statistics are as important as economic ones and that governments should also use these for measuring national progress.

The proportion of Australians who thought we should focus on economic statistics to measure national progress was 18%. The proportion who think we should also use health, social and environmental statistics was 79%, close to the average across the 10 countries.

Some people will ask why the way we measure prosperity should be an issue of Christian discipleship. I deliberately used words more commonly found in religious discourse - ‘fundamentalism’ and ‘heretical’.

I believe we are experiencing a clash of two profoundly antagonistic belief systems - the values and beliefs which drive the economic structure in the world today, self-absorbed,

acquisitive and greedy, and the teachings of all the great religions and indigenous cultures of the world which emphasise spiritual growth, mutuality and community as fundamental to human wellbeing.

Christianity should be the most creation-honouring of all religions because the Incarnation - God entering our physical reality in the person of Jesus - is the very heart of our faith.

The worldwide Anglican Communion acknowledges our responsibility to act rightly in the world in its **Five Marks of Mission** - 4 and 5 are:

- *To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation*
- *To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.*

The authors of an excellent book "Right Relationship", Peter G Brown and Geoffrey Garver, use the Quaker principle of right relationship to argue for a complete re-imagining of how we understand the relationship between economy and ecology.

As they put it, "*Economics based on consumerism and obsession with growth has become, in effect, the modern world's state-sponsored religion. This economy now needs, for the sake of the human future and indeed the future of the entire community of life, the same wind of change that was earlier directed at abolishing the economy of slavery.*"

For many people, Christianity is at best irrelevant and at worst tainted by scandals and self-protecting coverups. We need our faith to stand for something, to be seen as determining how we live and what we do.

It is the challenge of Christianity to reiterate our faith in every age to address the issues of the time and place - Paul in front of the Areopagus was doing precisely that (Acts 17:16-34). In our time, the biggest threat to wellbeing, to sharing justly the resources of the earth, and to acting justly towards the coming generations is the destruction our way of life is causing to God's creation.

If the churches are not in the forefront of those advocating for change and offering a prophetic and lived alternative, then perhaps we really are irrelevant.

By **Pamela Phillips**