

What's theology got to do with coal seam gas?

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Abstract

The debate surrounding Coal Seam Gas (CSG) is characterised by scientific studies of air pollution, environmental degradation, health impacts, and water management; legal questions relating to the rights of landowners and mining companies; and the lure of financial incentives arising from export earnings, employment opportunities and increased Government revenues.

It is a polarised policy arena into which, some might argue, theology should venture with trepidation. What value can theology add to the knowledge and expertise of professional scientists, economists, doctors and lawyers? Isn't it just a matter of finding the right balance between competing objectives? So does theology have a place at this policy table?

This paper reports on research into philosophical narratives that are shaping Australia's CSG policy framework, and explores fresh and emerging insights into humanity's relationship with the land that locate theology as a travelling companion with science in responding to today's environmental challenges.

Key words

Australian landscape art, coal seam gas, land, public policy, science, theology.

A Professor of Resource Economics once asked me 'What's theology got to do with coal seam gas (CSG)?'. And in today's climate of scientific,

economic and political rationalism, it's a valid question. What can the church add to the wisdom and expertise of professional economists, sociologists, engineers, geologists, ecologists, doctors and politicians? Set in this context, a subtitle for this paper could also be 'Land: the magic pudding that feeds economic development'.

For those not familiar with this classic Australian story, meet Albert, a magic pudding who, no matter how often he is eaten, always re-forms in order to be eaten again (Lindsay 1918). What's more, he loves to be eaten and has three protectors to defend him against the Pudding Thieves. By allegory, the land is there and happy to be consumed continually by those who protect it from unscrupulous developers - and isn't that what we intuitively assume?

So here I am now, a little over two years into my PhD, travelling a path that in my wildest dreams I could never have anticipated three years ago, and I think I can hear a divine chuckle. Far from theology being an irrelevant abstraction, I am inexorably being drawn towards the conclusion that theology has had, and will continue to have, a profound impact on Government policy.

My way into this has been to explore an Australian theology of land, although deliberately I have not included in this Aboriginal perspectives as they merit a PhD in their own right. I have found myself within a meta-narrative that journeys across poetry, art, theology, public policy and experience, seeking to 'connect the dots' between some diverse disciplines.

The exploration of a theology of land has attracted increasing attention over the last 50 years. Four broad themes of how Land (loosely, the rest of Creation) is seen in the Bible are evident in this literature (See, for example, Brueggemann 2003; Conradie 2004; Habel 1995; Inge 2003; Leal 1989; Lilburne 1989; and Santmire 1985.)

Land as stage	Land has no intrinsic value. The sole purpose of creation is to be a stage for human salvation.
Land as gift	Land is a gift from God to humanity, to be cared for and protected in service of humanity. Land has value to the extent that it attends to the needs of humanity.
Land as metaphor	Understanding our relationship with Land helps us to understand our relationship with God.
Land as being	In the eyes of God, as a part of a good Creation, Land has its own intrinsic value.

I was particularly influenced by a portrayal of *Land as neighbour* that invited reflection on Land as the traveller in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Tuwere 2002), and a discussion of an ecotheological triangle, based on an analysis of Amos, Hosea and First Isaiah (Marlow 2009), giving value to the relationship between God and the rest of Creation, independent of humanity.

So far, so good. I was well on track with my research schedule. I then made a first attempt to construct in a systematic way a theological conceptualisation of Land (Table). What it exposed was a difficulty in containing this conceptualisation within discrete, rigorous categories, let alone accommodating multi-terranean perspectives evident in Australian today. Each element has its own cultural and contextual meaning, open to interpretation. At best the table was a guide, but not a definitive description, for understanding land theologically.

Table: Theological conceptualisations of Land and their elements.

Creation metaphor	Stage	Incomplete	Mystery
Primary attitude to Land	Utility	Justice	Wonder
Motivation for action	Sustainability	Protection	Joy
Ecomission goals	N/A	Transformation	Celebration
How Land is valued	Anthropocentric	Hierarchical	Intrinsic
How Land is regarded	Resource	Created	Kin
Duty towards Land	Dominion	Stewardship	Service
Relationship with Land	Competitor	Home	Fellow traveller
Moral standing	Neutral	Good	Sacred
Legal treatment of Land	Terra Nullius	Rights	Equality

And this is where I came unstuck. The more I sought to conceptualise Land theologically, the more I struggled in my search for a systematic approach that adequately met my research needs. Too many questions that I could not answer came into my mind:

- What if humanity is God's gift to the Land?
- Is Land made in the image of God? Is Land sinful ... or good?
- Does Land seek or need God's forgiveness through Jesus' crucifixion?
- Is differentiating humanity from Land just anthropocentric arrogance?
- What is the good news for the whole creation, as in 'Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation' (Mark 16:15; NRSV)?
- Is the eschatological New Earth a purely spiritual existence?
- Do I love my neighbour, Land, as I love myself?

My struggles were then compounded by research I undertook into State and Commonwealth Government CSG policy initiatives over the last ten

years, where I found the dominant paradigm to be that of valuing Land as a resource to be exploited in interests of the nation. I found this overwhelming. The repetitive and almost idolatrous incantation of the rhetoric of economic development, almost always over-riding any other consideration was so transparent and, I have to say, disturbing.

I was also struck by the similarities this had with societal attitudes towards slaves in William Wilberforce's day: slaves (Land) contribute to the prosperity, wealth and economic development of the nation and, provided they (Land) are well looked after, why change things? Cries rang in my ears: 'The economy will suffer if we introduce an emissions trading scheme!' 'We'll change when our trading partners change.' After all, we already protect our environment, don't we? But even in our words I found we were fooling ourselves: protecting the environment was just a euphemism for reducing environmental harm. I could find little evidence of any initiatives by Governments or industry to *improve* the environment, despite the lofty objectives of environmental legislation.

My research impasse was that I could not articulate a contextual theology framework as a compelling alternative to the colonising zeal of economic determinism and scientific reductionism shaping the way we manage Land. In response to this, I began to explore other ways of acquiring knowledge and insights through experience, to complement the very analytical, structured, rational and logical approach I had automatically and unconsciously adopted as a consequence of my scientific training.

I decided to immerse myself in Australian landscape art, poetry and a wilderness experience — and loved it! For, in a nutshell, what this gave me was a preparedness to embrace mystery, ambiguity, paradox and uncertainty as fellow travellers with scientific rationality, economic quantification and reason in the public square. It was a very liberating experience.

I'll illustrate this by reference to Australian landscape art, and five paintings in particular that have contributed to my theological journey – a mere dipping of my toe into the vast world of Australian landscape art!

First, Edward Frome's 'First view of the salt desert – called Lake Torrens', painted in 1843 (Frome 1843). Land is *Terra Nullius*. This is a lonely picture, made all the more devastating as it destroyed hopes of pastoral paradises and an inland sea (McGrath and Olsen 1981 p. 26). The telescope held parallel to the horizon emphasises the flatness of the country and an equally featureless expanse of sky (Haynes 1998 p. 91). Land is nothing, there's no-one there and there's nothing to see. European explorers saw the land as God-forsaken and spoke of the Dead Centre of Australia. In this view, Land can be developed for what it has to offer; minimal regulation is needed. Further, there is little accountability to Land or recognition of its interests. This is the world of the rural pioneer, preparing a better future for later generations.

Russell Drysdale painted 'Man feeding his dogs' 100 years later (Drysdale 1941). A subtitle might be 'Life was not meant to be easy'. His characters

are heroic, not alien to, nor conquered by, the environment (McGrath and Olsen 1981 pp. 44–48). They came to be seen as the Aussie Battler, with the desert as a testing ground for man's eternal duel with nature (Haynes 1998 p. 168). This is the competitive world of the 'Common Good', where tough political decisions have to be made and there are winners and losers. It speaks to the anthropocentric utilitarianism found in public policy today.

35 years later, John Olsen painted 'Lake Eyre 1975' (Olsen 1975). Lake Eyre is below sea level, the lowest point in Australia. For Olsen it represents a microcosm of the cycle of life and death, symbolising a fertile womb, giving birth to a multitude of life forms in a festival of life — a complete reversal of the common image of the desert as a barren woman past her time (Haynes 1998 p 225). Thus in the Dead Centre of the ancient continent, Olsen finds evidence of life. Land is the ultimate source of life but, like Lake Eyre, subject to extreme changes. The world is mysterious and full of beauty but also of the uncertainty of existence, where the way ahead combines joy and pain, life and death.

Not only do these pictures present very contrasting images of Australia, but also they provide insights unique to the Australian landscape. Is one more true than the others? Does each have just one true interpretation? Or can we embrace all as informing our worldview and the nature of our created reality?

Move now to the Main Committee Room, Parliament House, Canberra, where Mandy Martin's 'Red Ochre Cove' hangs (Martin 1988). Commissioned in 1988, it contrasts strongly with Tom Roberts's 'Big Picture' which records the opening of the first Australian Parliament in Melbourne in 1903 (Roberts 1903). In Martin's painting, a shaft of light shines on an Australian bay rather than a British Duke; the Land rather than people act as witness; and the curved sky replaces the curved roof of the building. Land is no mere stage here. It's as if Martin is saying that legitimacy and authority come from Land, which is integral to affairs of state: so Parliament has a responsibility towards Land that goes well beyond the anthropocentric utilitarianism we find in its legislative agenda. Put more bluntly, Land is an essential and integral part of the Australian psyche, ignored at our peril.

But what of my own experience of Land? What I have just described is Land seen through the eyes of others. In July 2013 I embarked on a 'Spirit Journey' with 11 others, travelling overland along unsealed roads from Alice Springs to the top of the Great Australian Bight. I did this very specifically to *experience* Land. What I encountered was totally unexpected: flooding rains, a soaked swag, bogged cars, desolate gibber plains, refreshing hot springs and beautiful artwork in Broken Hill. My cup literally overflowed!

The best commentary I can provide of the trip, and my reflections on it are to refer to a sculpture I came across in Broken Hill of a woman with

landscape as her skin¹ – the artist’s response to a woman in an isolated outback community and very much a part of her environment, contemplating the dilemma of a cancer diagnosis whilst being far removed from the required specialist services. On my way home I wrote:

I loved this sculpture, as for me it incorporated beauty, a sense of interconnectedness and the presence of pain in our created reality. More contentiously, I also see it as Land contemplating whether CSG will be diagnosed as a cancerous growth.

I didn’t realise at the time what a portent of things to come this would be.

Three months after returning from this inspiring journey, a family member was diagnosed with metastatic cancer. Quite apart from all the other thoughts and emotions invading my mind, one notion persistently clamoured for attention:

Look at how you respond to what’s happening to a loved one. Do you respond to what’s happening to Land in a similar way?

In other words, I responded to a loved one in the context of a relationship. So might this, then, not also be appropriate in terms of what is happening to the Land – to respond in terms of a relationship, rather than treating Land as an object? In other words, is Land my neighbour? But is this an academically acceptable concept? And would it have any impact on public policy? Put simply, my response was both rational and experiential, and no-one would expect it to be otherwise. It reflected my worldview, informed by experience. Should the same apply, then, to my response in the public square to what is happening to Land?

Painful though they were, these reflections confirmed my research direction:

- academic theologizing, artistic expression and personal experience all complement one another in leading me down the path of understanding Land in terms of relationships rather than as an inanimate object;
- the hermeneutics of art, experience and biblical scholarship all point to the acceptability of embracing mystery, ambiguity, paradox and uncertainty as fellow travellers with scientific rationality, economic quantification and reason in their use as tools in public policy development; and
- a valid contribution that theology can make to the CSG debate is to act as a catalyst in stimulating essential discussion on the implicit worldviews that underpin our political decision-making.

Reinforcing this last point, earlier this year the ABC reported the Deputy Premier of Queensland as saying:

¹ The artist was Wendy Martin. See <http://www.visitnsw.com/destinations/outback-nsw/broken-hill-area/broken-hill/attractions/bush-and-beyond-studio-gallery>.

The Queensland Government is looking to restrict who can object to mining applications, in a bid to crack down on what it calls philosophical opposition to projects.

Sturmer 2014

Further, Lake states in her PhD thesis on early colonial settlement that:

Protestantism helped lay the foundations for colonial society by encouraging the transformation of the environment according to colonists' values and needs, and by providing the ideological support for the British use and occupation of the territory. Prominent Protestants applied their religious ideals to Australia in ways that tended to assist, legitimate or even necessitate the colonization of the land...

Lake 2008 p. 1

This led to reflection on value frameworks underpinning public policy debate and the role of theology in this regard. In my view, a Christian perspective cannot expect to be privileged in a post-secular, multicultural, multifaith, liberal democratic society. Nor will invoking a supreme divine authority necessarily lend policy legitimacy to a position.

The approach I decided to adopt was to draw on both the rational and the experiential, in a submission I made to the development by the Commonwealth Government of a White Paper on Agricultural Competitiveness. An overview of the submission is included as an Appendix to this paper. It summarises my policy research and puts the case for giving Land a discrete identity, recognising its intrinsic value and speaking in terms of a *relationship* with Land, rather than objectifying Land as a 'magic pudding' that feeds economic development.

This submission is an example of how I consider theology can contribute to the CSG debate. My Christian worldview led me to conclude that the intrinsic value of Land should be taken into account in the CSG policy framework. The discipline of public theology then required me to 'translate' this into a submission that hopefully would have some traction in the public square. Hence, the submission does not rely on biblical quotes or a mention of God, it provides only two theological sources and there is minimal discussion of faith. Yet I claim that it is, at its core, a legitimate child of public theology.

Conclusion

A key issue in the CSG debate is how we regard land. Do we see land as a mere *stage* for the drama of God's economy of salvation, a *magic pudding* to service human needs or, just possibly, an expression of the image of God, *imago dei*? My assertion is that the theology of land that we implicitly adopt fundamentally shapes our contribution to the public policy debate on CSG, and that value frameworks need to be explicitly identified in that debate.

Appendix

Submission by C Dalton on Agricultural Competitiveness Issues Paper

http://agriculturalcompetitiveness.dpmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/public-submissions/ip134_chris_dalton.pdf

Synopsis

In 1992 the Heads of Government of the Commonwealth, States and Territories signed a statement on national environmental policy that included four principles that should 'inform policy making and program implementation'. This submission puts the case for the White Paper on Agricultural Competitiveness to demonstrate how its recommendations on agricultural policy for the 21st century are informed by these principles. It advocates that this assessment should also address how the land can benefit from ecologically sustainable agricultural development, noting that State environment laws include the objects of 'improving the total quality of life', 'promoting a better environment' and 'enhancing the quality of the environment'.

The agricultural industry is inextricably linked with the environment, as is the energy sector. Healthy futures are forecast for both sectors if they respond effectively to the challenges they face, but they compete against each other for finite natural resources such as water and land. This draws attention to the significance of environmental factors in responding to the foreshadowed market opportunities and in securing the benefits of resource development for Australia.

The Coal Seam Gas (CSG) industry provides a relevant case study of the complex policy issues surrounding the emergence of a technologically advanced resource industry. Its introduction has been accompanied by significant community disquiet and conflict, well before its full economic potential has been realised. Environmental issues feature strongly in these concerns. Given the scope for competition between the CSG and agricultural sectors, and the growth potential of both, the White Paper could usefully review the relationship between the operation of competitive markets and meeting environmental policy objectives across two important industry sectors.

In doing so, this submission suggests that the White Paper should take into account evolving values and attitudes to the land that have emerged since the days of our rural pioneers. This could be through giving the land a discrete identity, recognising its intrinsic value and speaking in terms of a relationship with the land, rather than objectifying the land. It suggests the precautionary principle be expanded to require the exercise of caution if an ecologically sustainable development cannot be shown to deliver net benefits to the environment. This will provide a robust platform upon which to build 21st century policies.

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