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Consonance precipitates collaboration. The role of faith-based organisations in policymaking for environmental protection

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Abstract

The dialogue between science and religion, aiming for collaboration, not conflict, is crucial in addressing global crises like climate change. Both sides recognise each other's presuppositions without trying to impose beliefs on the other. The anatheistic approach, which suggests working together regardless of dogmatic belief in God to address mutual threats and find solutions for the planet, is a prime example. This inclusive, synergistic approach involving science and religion is not just a theoretical concept but a practical necessity for comprehensively addressing ecological challenges. It is not enough to discuss these issues in theory. Action is urgently needed. We must engage all stakeholders, including international bodies, in this approach. Faith-based organisations (FBOs) have a significant role in addressing environmental issues. Their unique perspective and resources can contribute to the development of effective policies. Integrating scientific evidence with beliefs and values is essential when making policies on issues like climate change.

Keywords

Science and religion dialogue; etsi Deus non daretur; Faith Based Organisations (FBOs); policymaking; Conference of the Parties (COP); 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); environmental protection.

1. Introduction

When writing these opening lines, South Africans eagerly await the outcome of political multiparty negotiations, with either a coalition or a

government of national unity (GNU) as a probable solution to the unforeseen impasse. The African National Congress (ANC) has ruled the country since the first democratic election in 1994. The ANC could not gather the majority vote in the National Election for the first time in thirty years. The possibility of even a minority government has been put on the table. With their 40% (previously 57%) support, the ANC urgently needed political liaisons with their rivals (some mild, others revolutionary). President Cyril Ramaphosa's words epitomised statesmanship when the election results were disclosed on Saturday, 01 June 2024. He said differences should be set aside now, and a common ground with a shared vision of the best for the country must be sought. Opposing and even radical and revolutionary political parties must meet around a table to benefit the whole country.[1]

Why are we using such a somewhat foreign opening paragraph for an article about the crucial science-religion dialogue and the role faith-based organisations can (and should) play in policymaking amidst our environmental crises?

Mutatis mutandis, one could allude to the most relevant title of one of Wentzel van Huyssteen's early books, *Duet or Dual* (1998), about the relationship between science and religion. The outcome of these political negotiations is not essential for this article. However, the suggested approach is inevitable, and the analogy of finding a solution amidst fierce disagreement and even hostility is what matters.

The relationship between science and religion could be epitomised in numerous ways, of which the four-fold classical typologies of the doyen of this field, Ian Barbour, are still, in our view, the most plausible: *conflict, independence, dialogue,* and *integration* (Barbour 2000). The typology of war sounds rather strange but was first used by Andrew Dickson White, who published back in 1869 some of his lectures in the New York Tribune on "The Battlefields of Science." There, he supports the following thesis:

> In all modern history, interference with science in the supposed interest of religion, no matter how conscientious such interference may have been, has resulted in the direst evils both to religion and

1 For the background of President Ramaphosa's response, read the letter of 3 June 2024, *From the Desk of the President* (Ramaphosa, 2024).

> science, and invariably; and, on the other hand, all untrammelled [sic] scientific investigation, no matter how dangerous to religion some of its stages may have seemed for the time to be, has invariably resulted in the highest good both of religion and science. (White 1895, loc. 45).

Andrew White regarded this relationship as "a war continued longer—with battles fiercer, with sieges more persistent, with strategy more vigorous than in any of the comparatively petty warfares of Alexander, or Caesar, or Napoleon." (cited by Numbers 2009:31).

This typology of conflict is still followed today. Ted Peters cites the late Harvard entomologist and sociobiologist Edward Osborne Wilson (1929-2021) as referring to the relationship between religion and science as *Armageddon*, the final defeat of religious darkness by the forces of scientific enlightenment: "The Armageddon in the conflict between science and religion … is the attempt by scientists to explain religion to its foundations … At its source, the struggle is not between people but between world-views." (Cited by Peters 2023:437).

Against this background, the Nobel Prize winner and physicist Steven Weinberg's well-known slogan is appropriate to our argument: "Science doesn't make it impossible to believe in God; it just makes it possible not to believe in God." (Weinberg 2024:n.p.). The science and religion dialogue is not a matter of warfare, and neither party intends to conquer the other (dual) but acknowledges the respective positions based on a challenge that seeks common ground and mutual vistas (duet). *Religion does not want to convince science of the existence of God or convert incumbents to religion; instead, it intends to collaborate towards a solution to the real crises of our time, as manifested, among other things, in the global warming indices.*

Our working hypothesis amidst the ecological crises is that scientists and believers should work together *as if* God does not exist! At least the partners meet on equal terms to address mutual threats and seek positive collaborations for the planet's well-being. Cooperation is emphasised over abstract dialogue.

2. The value of an anatheistic approach

One of the founders of modern international law, Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), played a significant role in the deliberations to end the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) between Roman Catholics and Protestants in Central Europe. The conflict started as a religious war but later became a fight for power between the Kingdom of France and the House of Habsburg of the Holy Roman Empire (Anonymous 2022:1). Grotius endeavoured to establish a connection between religion and politics, laying a foundation of law and peace "without any use or misuse of the name of God" and made the expression *etsi Deus non daretur* eminent (Ehricht 2019:185). He opted for this approach because he believed that the creator wanted us to be dependent and need a proper life to drive us even more towards a process of socialisation (Grotius 1901:288). The foundation lies for him instead in the Law of Nature and the Law of Nations, which advances a spirit of tolerance for each one:

> A power derived not from the civil law only, but from the law of nature, which allows every man to relinquish what is his own, and from a natural presumption that a person designed to do the act which he has given manifest proofs of his intention to do (Grotius 1901:111).

This approach marks the advent of a worldview in which the world and humans are sovereign and independent from the transcendental God, yet with a teleology of common good and an urge to cooperate.

In his *Letters from Prison* during World War II, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that a time of *non-religiosity* had dawned upon society and even added that it was not necessarily for the worse: "I often ask myself why a Christian instinct often draws me more to the religionless people than to the religious. It is because religion always seems to be exploiting human weakness or boundaries." (Bonhoeffer n.d.:50). He wanted to engage in the world *as if God did not exist*, a world that had come of age, where the God hypothesis was not a precondition for meaningful dialogue. For him, a non-religious interpretation of the Christian faith is imperative. We argue thus that an apologetic approach of a religious a priori becomes obsolete when faith-

based organisations and governmental bodies pursue collaboration for environmental protection.[2]

Theological jargon and dogmas impede society's mutual quest for common ground and shared vistas in a time of peril. We concur thus with Simut stating the following:

> Irrespective of the fact that confessional theologies accept the idea of an ontologically real God who created nature whilst secular philosophies reject it, it is indisputable that nature itself is the common denominator of both endeavours. Thus, they are both preoccupied with economy, education, and politics and in doing so they both address the public square in all its cultural complexity (Simut 2020:8).

In addition, Richard Kearney distinguishes dogmatic atheism from dogmatic theism in that it resists absolutist positions against the divine, as it contrasts with the absolutist positions of dogmatic theism about the divine. As Bonhoeffer, he pleads for faith without religion, as seen above. Perhaps we should let Kearney speak for himself:

> We are, to borrow from Kierkegaard, not concerned with a "recollection" backward but with a "repetition" forward. The ana signals a movement of return to what I call a primordial wager, to an inaugural instant of reckoning at the root of belief. It marks a reopening of that space where we are free to choose between faith or nonfaith. As such, anatheism is about the option of retrieved belief. It operates before as well as after the division between theism and atheism, and it makes both possible. Anatheism, in short, is an invitation to revisit what might be termed a primary scene of religion: the encounter with a radical Stranger who we choose, or don't choose, to call God (Kearney 2010:7).

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2 It is crucial to understand Bonhoeffer correctly and highlight the profound significance of his desire for the church to be "open to the world". This perspective, however, should not be misconstrued as a surrender of the church's identity or the profound mystery of its faith in Christ, as that would be akin to embracing "cheap grace" (cf. Vosloo 2012:48–49).

To engage in a discourse between scientists and believers, deconstruction of both presuppositions is necessary. The bridge-builders believe we must find a way to attain the truth; the ground-diggers believe we are already in the truth, God is the truth, and the task is to uncover its truth (cf. Caputo 2023:15). Consonance[3] is only to be obtained on the extent of our interdependence and how it is best managed. McDonough *et al.* say it aptly in the summary and recommendations of their recent book, *On the Significance of Religion for Global Diplomacy* (2021): "'Religious literacy' is already acknowledged as a necessary diplomatic skill. It is time to enable a deeper engagement by public authorities with religious perspectives as a resource in global peacebuilding and diplomacy." (McDonough *et al.* 2021: xix).

This approach lays the table for constructive cooperation and acknowledges each party's benevolence and role in a perilous world.

3. Common ground and shared vistas

In 2015, a group of global environmentalists united under an ambitious *Transforming the World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* initiative. This plan was unveiled during the fourth plenary meeting of the United Nations General Assembly Summit in New York between 25 and 27 September 2015. The agenda entails *17 Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) aimed at eliminating poverty in all its forms and fostering a safer, healthier, and more sustainable world for individuals worldwide by the year 2030 (UN 2015).

The unparalleled challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing environmental issues, especially the fluctuations in global climate, have underscored the urgency of advancing towards a sustainable future that transcends borders, cultures, and generations (Wellcome Trust 2022).

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3 John Haught favours the term "consonance" over "dialogue" to depict the connection between science and religion. He argues that "consonance" suggests a more profound integration and harmony between the two domains rather than just an exchange of ideas. This viewpoint promotes a collaborative approach, where discoveries from scientific investigation can enhance spiritual comprehension and vice versa (Michaud 2010:905).

Subsequently, it is imperative to engage all stakeholders, including international bodies, in using science's potential to address critical global issues. Moreover, recognising the vital role of diverse religious beliefs and values can significantly contribute to addressing environmental concerns. A synergistic approach involving science and religion is essential for holistically tackling ecological dilemmas.

Nevertheless, the epistemology of science has never been more questioned and debated. Alexander Stern asserts, therefore, that "While these explanations have their merits, we pay too little attention to the way that technocracy, or rule by scientific and managerial experts, paradoxically contributes to the declining trust in science." (Stern 2022:56-60). Climate change deniers seem to appeal to large sections of society, showing that science is not just a scientific and technological problem; it is intimately intertwined with our worldview and the set of values that we bring to the conversation when we reflect on how we want to shape the future of people and the planet.

However, in an apophatic way, James Meigs somehow acknowledges this hybrid research approach. He asserts that "In the twenty-first century, however, American scientific media, including Scientific American, began to slip into lockstep with progressive beliefs. Suddenly, certain orthodoxies – especially concerning race, gender, or climate – couldn't be questioned." (Meigs 2024: n.p.). We concur with the caveat of Ted Peters: "When this happens, the public systematic theologian should blow the whistle, wave the red flag, and scream: Science should limit itself to science! Science should not practice theology without a license!" (Peters 2021:2).

A materialistic belief system occasionally influences scientific theories, causing enthusiastic advocates to mix their materialist assumptions with empirical findings. Consequently, scientists may reject knowledge claims from disciplines like the humanities, religion, or the arts that do not align with their perspectives. The aim, therefore, is not to contaminate science with subjective worldviews or religion with mere fact-based evidence but to find a way of working together to benefit the planet.

4. Making a case for policymaking and religious values

It seems reasonable to argue that policymaking should be solely based on scientific evidence around which people can ponder benefits and risks until we find a plausible solution and that, therefore, any personal values, beliefs or worldview should be kept separate. Science has proven to be a powerful intellectual tool capable of unravelling the intricacies of nature, bringing undeniable benefits to our modern societies.

However, science is not practised in a vacuum, and scientists bring to their quests for knowledge and problem-solving not only their technical skills and knowledge but also their passions, obsessions, and values, including spirituality and religious beliefs. Ted Peters (2021:2) is correct when he asserts that scientists should stray from their moral duty to adhere to intellectual principles by restricting their conclusions to what is backed by evidence.

The *UN Environment Programme* (UNEP) and the *Parliament of the World's Religions* published "Faith for Earth – A Call for Action" in 2020. The book gives readers a wide-ranging look at the history and diversity of faith teachings and their advocacy for protecting the environment (UN 2020).

It is estimated that around 80% of the world population today has some form of religious affiliation (Hackett et al., 2012). Faith-based organisations own 8% of the habitable land surface, 5% of all commercial forests, 50% of the schools worldwide, 64% of schools in sub-Saharan Africa, 10% of the world's total financial institutions, and 14% of its community development corporations (UN 2020:6). If we focus on environmental protection, it is essential to note that the most crucial conservation places in the world are considered sacred and deeply rooted in some form of local spiritual and cultural traditions (Verschuuren Wild *et al.* 2010:17:76). Moreover, Indigenous populations and *Faith-Based Organisations* (FBOs) have been effective guardians of our environment for centuries, using technologies and nature-based solutions to benefit people and the planet.

Therefore, it is surprising that the voices of faith communities are rarely heard in policymaking. Religious values, beliefs, teachings, Indigenous knowledge, and international standards of ethics provide a much-needed

alternative paradigm to change people's attitudes and behaviours toward sustainably managing nature and natural resources (Abumoghli 2023:488). Consequently, we believe that including FBOs in a conversation about the future of our planet is not only a question of equality but that, as traditional knowledge holders, they hold the key to a value-based approach to climate change.

5. A case study on faith-based policymaking around COP[4]

The collaboration between different faith groups is crucial for advancing the implementation of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. Despite having different traditions, many faith groups share the aim of preserving the natural environment and addressing the triple planetary crisis. By working together to achieve the 2030 Agenda, these faith groups can safeguard our common home more effectively. Collaboration between different faith groups and within the same faith is a necessary part of the multilateral approach to address the complex challenges facing our world and the legacy we leave for future generations (cf. Abumoghli 2023:492).

FBOs have been present for several years at high-level intergovernmental meetings such as the *Conference of the Parties* (COP) to raise the profile of religious engagement on climate issues. The *Pew Research Centre's Forum on Religion & Public Life* (PFRPL 2012) launched an effort to generate up-to-date and comprehensive estimates of the current size and projected growth of the world's major religious groups, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism. Religions not mentioned have been consolidated into 'other religions' (Puglisi & Buitendag 2022:7). The question, however, is, what has been their specific role in policymaking?

FBOs are strategic stakeholders and increasingly capable value-based policymakers on at least three distinct levels: *advocacy, consultative,* and *joint policymaking*.

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4 The *Conference of the Parties* (COP) is the pinnacle of decision-making authority within the Convention. All states that are Parties to the Convention are represented at the COP. During these crucial meetings, they meticulously review the implementation of the Convention and legal instruments, making decisions that hold the power to promote effective implementation. This includes decisions about institutional and administrative arrangements. [Online]. Available: https://unfccc.int/process/bodies/supreme-bodies/conference-of-the-parties-cop.

5.1 Advocacy role

The COP21 in Paris in 2015 was the first platform on which FBOs played a more visible role in environmental policymaking. In the run-up to that critical event, faith leaders issued several official statements and declarations emphasising their communities' commitment to a sustainable future.

In that context, the Pope issued his landmark document, *Laudato Si'*, urging the one billion-strong Catholic community to increase its efforts to tackle global warming (Francis 2015). This document catalysed environmental action far beyond the Catholic Church.

Immediately after *Laudato Si*, other religious leaders also released similar declarations, such as "A Hindu Declaration on Climate Change"[5], "A Buddhist Climate Change"[6], "A Rabbinic Letter on the Climate Crisis"[7] and an "Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change".[8]

The various declarations shared a deep concern about the future of our planet and an unprecedented call to action for their communities. At the same time, they all showed profound respect for science and technology whilst appealing to their sacred texts and spiritual practices to motivate ecological action.

COP26 in Glasgow was another momentous opportunity for FBOs concerning climate action. At that UN climate summit, Pope Francis and other religious leaders, including Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby and Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, issued a pre-COP26 appeal on climate change and made a public commitment to creating plans for the environment (Pullella 2021: n.p.). The pledge and dedication to the environment were formalised on 4 October 2021, with the launch of the

5 "A Hindu Declaration on Climate Change". [Online]. Available: http://www.hinduclimatedeclaration2015.org/english

6 "A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change." [Online]. Available: https://fore.yale.edu/files/buddhist_climate_change_statement_5-14-15.pdf.

7 "A Rabbinic Letter on the Climate Crisis." [Online]. Available: https://www.earthday.org/rabbinic-letter-climate-crisis-calls-action/.

8 "Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change." [Online]. Available: https://www.ifees.org.uk/about/islamicdeclaration/

'Faith Plans for People and Planet' program. [9] This program represents the global faith community's most prominent and boldest environmental initiative.

However, faith communities have been the most visible and vocal at the recent COP28 in Dubai. For the first time in the history of the UN climate conferences, a COP has hosted its *Faith Pavilion* for the participation of religious communities. The Faith Pavilion was a space for interfaith dialogue and leveraged the influence of religious leaders on policymakers to develop more effective climate measures. This event aims to unite various stakeholders to emphasise the immediate need for action, showcase innovative solutions globally, and highlight the essential contribution of faith communities in addressing the climate emergency to safeguard humanity and the Earth.[10]

Before COP28, Pope Francis issued another essential document, *Laudate Deum*, which reads like a policy paper dedicating a heartfelt section on "what to expect from COP28 in Dubai" (Francis 2023:11). At the same time, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, president of the United Arab Emirates, organised a *Global Faith Leaders' Summit, Confluence of Conscience: Uniting for Planetary Resurgence*. The summit brought together over 150 representatives from science and religion of the major religions and Indigenous traditions to enhance climate ambitions ahead of COP28.

During the gathering, twenty-eight religious representatives signed the Abu Dhabi Interfaith Statement on Climate Change for COP28, calling for decisive measures to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C. The attendees supported the importance of science, traditional wisdom, and human rights commitment. The declaration emphasises the importance of living a value-based, ethical, and sustainable way of life.

5.2 Consultative role

International institutions increasingly recognise the importance of working with faith-based organisations (FBOs) to promote sustainable development,

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9 "Faith Plans for People and Planet." [Online]. Available: https://www.faithplans.org/ [Accessed: 17/06/2024].

10 https://faithatcop28.com/. [Accessed: 17/06/2024].

particularly in the environment. Their enormous convening power and the capacity to initiate new, multilayered, and inclusive collaborations across borders have often made religious networks indispensable (McDonagh et al. 2023).

Another important example comes from the *Worldwide Fund for Nature* (WWF), which has begun the *Sacred Earth Program* to formulate ethical and spiritual ideals regarding the sacred value of the Earth and its diversity.[11] In 2010, the United Nations created the *Interagency Task Force on Religion and Sustainable Development* (UN-IATF)[12] and, in 2018, the *Multi-faith Advisory Council* (MFAC) "to provide strategic policy guidance around engagement with FBOs to deepen the UN's understanding of the intersections between religion, development, human rights and peace".

Pope Francis makes in paragraph 43 an essential observation about decision-making, especially consultation, to reconfigure multilateralism. There is a need to create a fresh approach to decision-making and confirm such decisions, as the current method established several decades ago is deemed inadequate and seemingly ineffective. Within this paradigm, creating opportunities for dialogue, discussion, mediation, conflict resolution, and supervision is crucial, ultimately requiring a higher level of global "democratisation," ensuring the representation of diverse perspectives. It is no longer tenable to endorse institutions that prioritise the interests of the elite while disregarding the rights of all individuals (Francis 2023:10).

5.3 Direct policymaking role

In some cases, FBOs have also significantly influenced policies and participated in international climate negotiations. The Vatican, for instance, has formalised its seat at the negotiating table for the ratification of the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* (UNFCCC) in 2022.[13]

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11 https://www.worldwildlife.org/initiatives/sacred-earth-faiths-for-conservation.

12 https://www.unep.org/resources/report/un-interagency-task-force-religion-and-development-annual-report-2019.

13 https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2022/07/08/220708a.html.

Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world, has been a leader in environmental protection. In 2014, the Indonesian Council of Ulema, the most influential Muslim organisation in the country, issued an Islamic fatwa, or edict, that mandated the country's 200 million Muslims to actively participate in protecting endangered species such as tigers, rhinos, elephants, and orangutans as part of their religious duty.[14] Another *fatwa* followed in 2016, banning 'the burning of forests and land that can cause damage, pollution, harm to other persons, adverse health effects and other harmful effects, is religiously forbidden (*haram*).'[15] In 2015, Malaysia passed a *fatwa* against wildlife poaching inspired by the Indonesian model.

Significant forest loss has occurred in Cambodia, but local Buddhist monks have played a key role in conservation efforts. They have obtained legal protection for a 20,000-hectare forest, led community patrol teams, raised environmental awareness, and notably reduced forest crime. The monks have wrapped their saffron robes around tree trunks, blessed the trees, and even ordained them as monks.[16]

6. Conclusion

Religion's role is often associated with challenges in the relationship between religion and society, but it also offers attractive promises. The world's major religions have been sources of wisdom for thousands of years, guiding humanity through profound crises. Today, they are still among the most important contributors to the planet, often providing education, medical care, welfare, and compassion in the most challenging environments.

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14 "Protection of Endangered Species to Maintain the Balanced Ecosystems." *Fatwa* (Religious Pronouncement) of the Indonesian Council of Ulama, Number 04/2014. [Online]. Available: http://ppi.unas.ac.id/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Fatwa_MUI-libre.pdf.

15 Law on the burning of forests and land and the control thereof, *Fatwa* (Religious Pronouncement) of the Ulama Council of Indonesia, Number 30/2016. [Online]. Available: http://ppi.unas.ac.id/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/FATWA-KARHUTLA-English.pdf.

16 "To Protect the Environment, Buddhist Monks Are Ordaining Trees", *Sojourners*. [Online]. Available: https://sojo.net/articles/protect-environment-buddhist-monks-are-ordaining-trees. [Accessed: 17/06/2024].

In the context of policymaking, the voices of religious and indigenous communities, alongside those of science and technology, seem to bring a fresh perspective to a conversation about policy and values, particularly about environmental action.

The outlined policymaking levels at which FBOs can operate make them valuable stakeholders in the design of the future of our societies. Through their emphasis on wisdom, social cohesion, and the sense of human embeddedness in the natural world, FBOs demonstrate a remarkable capacity not only to *mobilise* people to respond to climate change but, perhaps more importantly, to find an effective way to *motivate* individuals and communities moving from their core values.

When examining the complexities of policymaking around a deeply humanistic issue such as climate change, we are urged to juxtapose – and even integrate – sound scientific evidence and the role that beliefs and values, including spiritual and traditional ones, can play. The Oxford Handbook of Corporate Social Responsibility states that religion has historically been the primary impetus for socially responsible investment (McWilliams *et al.* 2019:253). Together, we could tackle the ecological crises of our time. Common ground can be found, so mutual vistas can be used to create collaboration towards a better life for all. Cooperation does not imply evangelising.

McDonagh *et al.* believe that international organisations should use their convening power to create new, multilayered, consultative processes, including religious representatives, as an extra dimension within the broader project of making multilateral diplomacy fit for purpose. We concur with the central thesis of McDonagh *et al.* that "new forms of historical and religious literacy, allied to new frameworks of engagement, can enable a more creative global diplomacy." (McDonagh *et al.* 2023: xx).

With the completion of this article, South African politicians have agreed upon a Government of National Unity (GNU), and except for two extremist and revolutionary parties, almost all are on board for a vista beneficial to all. Hostility has become hospitality and the dual, a duet.

This secular analogy reminds perhaps of the Parable of the Unjust Manager (Luke 16:1-13), which reflects some principles regarding our resources: as

believers, we are managers of God's resources, our ability to manage God's resources will end soon, and we could enjoy the time to come so much more as we act self-sacrificingly now.

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