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CHRISTIANITY AND GLOBAL WARMING

Job 38: 1–3, 25–38 Colossians 1:12–20

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Introduction

Global climate change is ‘unequivocal’ and ‘unprecedented’ according to the Fifth Assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, published in 2014. The assessment report states that, ‘The atmosphere and ocean have warmed, the amounts of snow and ice have diminished, sea level has risen, and the concentrations of greenhouse gases have increased.’¹ It goes on to suggest that concentrations of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases are now higher than they have been for nearly a million years, long before human society began.

Of course climate change is just one of a complex and interconnected range of environmental issues facing us in the 21st century. These include rising consumption patterns and standards of living, population growth, increasing demand for finite natural resources, loss of natural habitat and biodiversity, and higher levels of toxic waste and pollution. Attempts to tackle the issues at a national and international level using political and economic means have met with limited success. Even at the individual and community level, environmental organisations experience significant frustration in their inability to bring about long term change in behaviour and decision making.² This should not surprise us. No amount of exhortation or scaremongering can fully change people’s attitudes and actions. Something more is needed. As early as 1999 in the 4th Kew Environmental lecture, Prof Maurice Strong, the first executive director of the United Nations Environment Programme, observed, ‘In the final analysis, our economic and social behavior is rooted in our deepest moral and spiritual motivations.’³

In 2007, the Environment Agency conducted a survey of 25 leading environmental experts in the UK, ranging from scientists to campaigners and authors, asking them ‘What are the 50 things that will save the planet?’ Some of the answers were creative, even bizarre, but in the top five, ranked at number two (behind number one ‘cut power consumption’) was the plea that religious groups make the planet their priority. ‘It’s time

¹ IPCC Fifth Assessment Report 2014 http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/wg1/WG1AR5_SPM_FINAL.pdf (accessed 16th May 2015).

² Georgina M. Mace and Jonathan E.M. Baillie, ‘The 2010 Biodiversity Indicators: Challenges for Science and Policy’, *Conservation Biology* 21, No. 6 (2007).

³ Maurice Strong, *The Fourth Kew Environmental Lecture, Beyond Rio: New World Order, or Lost Opportunity?* (London: Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, 1993).

the world's faith groups reminded us we have a duty to restore and maintain the ecological balance of the planet' said the survey; '... Christians, Muslims, Hindus and others already believe that it is morally wrong to damage the environment... Religious leaders need to encourage their followers to set an example to the rest of the population.'⁴

This is a real wake-up call for the church, and may be a surprise in our increasingly secular society. But let's not forget that an estimated 84% of the world's population – nearly 6 billion people – consider themselves members of a religious tradition, either the 11 global 'mainstream faiths' or more local indigenous, often animist religions.⁵ Of these, the highest group, at nearly 40%, is Christian. So how can Christians respond to this challenge to take their responsibilities more seriously?

Theologian Oliver O'Donovan writes, 'The climate is not just a problem to be solved, but a question to be reflected on profoundly, searching deep into the relation between humankind and its creator.'⁶ In what follows we will reflect on what the Bible and Christian theology tells us about the relation between God and the world, and consider some social and ethical responses.

Bible and Theology

The narratives and poetry of the Old Testament are often conceived as telling the story of Israel's relationship with God, for good and bad. But it is intriguing to notice how often the texts also speak of a clear and profound relationship between the Israelites and the natural world, one that can be either beneficial or harmful. It seems that there are three main players in the biblical story: the people of Israel, the LORD their God and the physical world; their stories are intertwined. As Michael Northcott puts it, 'Israel's poets and prophets read Israel's relationship with God *through* her experience of climate'.⁷

An example of this is our Old Testament reading from the book of Job, which is part of an extraordinary and detailed description of the created world seen from God's perspective. Through a stream of questions, God challenges Job to reassess his perspective on life in the light of the whole created order, not just his own problems: 'Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?' God asks (Job 38: 4).⁸ The focus, in the words of theologian David Ford, 'is radically shifted from Job's suffering to the priority of God and the necessity of a wisdom that relates to God, humanity and creation'.⁹ In today's passage, the weather and weather systems are the locus of the poet's attention. But God's purposes for the weather extend beyond the scope of human life and activity to the wellbeing of

⁴ Environment Agency, *Your Environment Extra*, Issue 17, Nov 2007 (<http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Environment/documents/2007/10/31/5otop.pdf> accessed 16th May 2015).

⁵ http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html (accessed 16th May 2015).

⁶ Back cover endorsement of Michael Northcott, *A Political theology of Climate Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

⁷ Michael Northcott, *A Political theology of Climate Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

⁸ All Bible references are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

⁹ David Ford, *Christian wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

the whole creation. In verse 26 we read that God brings ‘rain on a land where no one lives, on the desert, which is empty of human life, to satisfy the waste and desolate land, and to make the ground put forth grass’.

The Christian doctrine of God as creator and sustainer of all that exists gives a high value to this material world. It is a value that goes far beyond a utilitarian perspective on nature – one that merely regards it as a commodity to be exploited for profit or, at best, to provide the resources of food and fuel for human development. The biblical authors regard the earth as the creation, possession and dwelling place of God and understand that God’s care and provision extends to the whole created order. Psalm 104, that great celebration of creation, proclaims;

‘Oh Lord, how many are your works, in wisdom you have made them all. The earth is full of your creatures....They all look to you to give them their food in due season.’ (Psalm 104: 24, 27)

Elsewhere in the psalms we read that the creation reflects and reveals the glory of the creator (e.g., Psalm 19: 1–2), and that the call to praise God is something we share with the rest of creation, rather than something that distinguishes us from it (e.g., Psalm 148).

If all creation is valuable to God, what part do human beings play in the divine drama? The first two chapters of Genesis paint two very different yet complementary pictures of the role of humanity in the world. In Genesis 1 human beings, made ‘in the image and likeness of God’, are commanded to exercise divinely delegated dominion over other creatures. In Genesis 2 the human, made from dust, (a wordplay in Hebrew: *adam* from the *adamah*) is placed in the garden to serve and preserve it. In the one, humans are priests over creation and in the other, gardeners or ‘earth-keepers’. Implicit in both roles is the notion of responsibilities not rights, giving back not just taking.

The New Testament also gives a high value to the physical world. The opening of John’s gospel stresses that it is the Word of God, the one through whom all things were made, who becomes incarnate into his own creation, thus affirming its worth. And as our lesson from the book of Colossians reminds us, Christ is creator and sustainer of all things. More than that, the redemptive self-giving of Christ is in order ‘to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.’ (Colossians 1: 20). Both the birth and the death of Christ place the present material world at the centre of God’s redemptive purposes.

So then, the Christian doctrines of creation, incarnation and redemption affirm the importance of the natural world. They offer Christians strong theological reasons for acting to reduce the destruction of our planet, whether it is the delicately balanced climate system or the wealth of biodiversity in forests and oceans.

Social and ethical issues

Climate change is also a justice issue! Concern for social justice and care for the vulnerable are fundamental aspects of the Christian biblical and theological tradition. Old Testament prophets such as Amos spoke out against exploitation of the poor and called for a society characterised by justice and righteousness. The command in Leviticus to 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Leviticus 19: 18) is echoed in the gospels (e.g., Mark 12: 13, Luke 10: 27) and has been the motivation for countless projects and individual acts of kindness across the world. What does justice mean in a world experiencing unprecedented global warming?

Climate change inevitably has a much more serious effect on the poor and disadvantaged – whether it's the effect of flooding in low-lying areas such as Bangladesh, or the failure of crops because of drought in Sub-Saharan Africa. It has been estimated that one sixth of the world's population (i.e., UK, N America and W. Europe) produces over half the CO² emissions that contribute to global climate change.¹⁰ The poor are far less able to escape adverse weather conditions or shortage of resources. In our global village, the people in places on the other side of the world are our neighbours just as much as is the person down the street. So 'love your neighbour' takes on a new dimension, and challenges us to think about how we respond as affluent Western Christians to environmental issues worldwide.

Christian virtues

In recent years virtue ethics has enjoyed a resurgence in Christian thought and may help our thinking here. Many of the virtues encouraged by environmental ethicists have their origin in the Christian tradition, and before that, in the cardinal virtues of Greek philosophy.¹¹ Of these, the virtues of justice, restraint and wisdom can inform Christian responses to environmental issues. We have already discussed the importance of social justice; now let us consider first, restraint and then, wisdom in a global environmental context.

There is no doubt that western affluent lifestyles, consumption patterns and our throw-away culture are contributing to the environmental degradation that impacts the poor and vulnerable in other countries. So living with restraint, that is learning to consume less and avoid wastage, is an on-going challenge for Christians in a materialist culture, where the pressure to own more and more 'stuff' and to spend (and get into debt) recklessly is ever-present. As Mahatma Gandhi famously said, 'The earth provides enough to satisfy everyone's need, but not for everyone's greed.'¹² The Church needs to take seriously the call to 'live lightly' on this planet, so that other creatures, human and non-human, can also live.

¹⁰ James C. White (Ed.) *Global Energy Strategies: Living with Restricted Greenhouse Gas Emissions* (New York: Springer, 1993).

¹¹ Celia Deane-Drummond, *The Ethics of Nature*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 1–28.

¹² Y.P. Anand and Mark Lindley, "Gandhi on Providence and Greed", *Mainstream*, XL/15, New Delhi (2007).

Finally we return to our Old Testament reading from Job, where wisdom is a predominant theme. 'Who has wisdom?' the poem asks rhetorically, and the clear answer is: God, the creator of all, seen and unseen. Wisdom is personified in the Old Testament (Proverbs 8), and epitomised as Christ the Wisdom of God in the New. For the Christian, wisdom is both the knowledge of ultimate truth that is found in the Trinity *and* the God-given ability to make good judgements and act prudently. The complex nature of environmental issues and their impact on global political, economic and social structures means that practical wisdom is needed as never before.

In December 2015, representatives from 196 nations will meet in Paris to sign a new global climate change agreement. The previous climate summit in Copenhagen in 2009 promised much but delivered little. What will be different this time? On a practical level, individual countries are being asked to come forward with their own ambitions and plans for carbon reduction, instead of adopting targets set for them. But reaching agreement will also require changes in attitude, respect for the other and, above all, wisdom. As the epistle of James reminds us, this is something God gives to those who ask (James 1: 5). Christian churches and worshipping communities such as this Chapel should be praying for world leaders to have the wisdom to address climate change, just as they pray for peace in the world.

What does Christianity have to do with the environment? It is about learning to live wisely and lightly as creatures, not gods, in the world that God has created and redeemed; it is also about challenging structures and practices that result in environmental injustice, and praying for those making the decisions that affect the wellbeing of our planet. .