

GREEN GOSPEL

CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO THE CHALLENGES OF PEAK OIL AND CLIMATE CHANGE*

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Abstract: *Climate change and depletion of the earth's resources are important issues for the twenty-first century. The Transition Town movement demonstrates the importance of working locally to build community cohesion and resilience at the same time as calling for national and international action. Creation care is gradually being given greater prominence in the church in the UK and there is scope for collaboration between churches and Transition groups. However, many Christians are receiving little or no teaching on just how "green" the gospel message is and Christian environmentalists remain in the minority in the churches, despite the clear biblical mandate for us to care for all that God has made.*

We stand on the edge of the most momentous task in history, thoroughly ill-prepared.¹

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith.²

Introduction

Environmentalism is a relatively recent phenomenon, dating back only fifty years. But creation care is as old humanity itself; the first biblical references to tending the garden that God had made appear in the book of Genesis. In the church, however, the disciplines of Christian environmental ethics and eco-theology are modern responses to a growing awareness that we have failed in that task and that God calls us to re-assess the place of the natural world in our faith and practice. These academic disciplines form one strand of the Christian response to the crises that threaten to overwhelm the human habitat that is planet Earth. Christian environmental ethics and

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¹ Rob Hopkins, *The Transition Handbook: From oil dependency to local resilience* (Foxhole, Devon: Green Books, 2008), 77.

² Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1952), 63.

eco-theology trace the moral and biblical rationale behind caring for biodiversity and for the planet and those who write on these subjects have produced a wealth of material in recent years. The second and seemingly separate strand is at the grass roots – in local churches and communities, where lay Christians and some clergy in the UK seek ways to put their commitment to caring for creation into practice. Establishing common cause with others, and coming together at conferences, retreats and workshops, their efforts have resulted in a number of programmes – some denomination-based, some ecumenical, and still others working alongside secular initiatives – that witness that the church is deeply concerned and prepared to take action. What follows is a description of some of these programmes, together with a summary of the background against which they have been developed. Similar things are being done in other parts of the world but the focus here is on the situation in the UK.

Background

In 1962 Rachel Carson published a book that highlighted the damaging effects that human activity was having on the natural environment. In *Silent Spring*, she specifically targeted the widespread use of chemical pesticides and herbicides but in doing so expounded on the “central truth of ecology: that everything in nature is related to everything else.”³ Her book sold widely and, although she came in for fierce criticism from some sectors of industry and the press, she is now recognised as a founder of the modern environmental movement.

Five years later, Lynn White Jr wrote an extremely influential article, still frequently quoted more than forty years later.⁴ While Carson’s work brought into the public arena fears about the detrimental effects that humanity was having on the natural world, White specifically challenged the Christian church. He claimed that Christianity, particularly in the West, had fostered an attitude of domination and exploitation towards the natural world that had given rise to many of the ecological problems being encountered towards the end of the twentieth century. The idea that Christian teaching “had been a major factor in producing the attitudes and practices that were responsible for the ecological crisis” was taken up by others during the

³ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1962); Linda Lear, “Afterword” in Carson, *Silent Spring* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), 258.

⁴ Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155 (1967), 1203-1207.

1970s.⁵ In the West, Christian ideas about faith and theology are largely concerned with existential issues – despair, guilt, death, sin and so on – and God’s loving, merciful and forgiving response. Therefore, Western Christianity has for many centuries been largely anthropocentric in character.⁶ Fostered by the biblical statement that humans, unlike all other creatures, were made in the image of God, the result was a dualistic view of humankind and nature and an insistence “that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.”⁷ This attitude is still a problem today and – particularly in the USA – there are evangelical Christians who remain sceptical about climate change and convinced that humanity’s domination of the earth is God’s will.

White noted that “concern for the problem of an ecologic backlash is mounting feverishly” – something that has become even more apparent in recent years and has been highlighted by a number of writers, among them Alastair McIntosh, whose book *Hell and High Water*⁸ has been commended by Rowan Williams.⁹ Although humans have always affected their environment, it was the marriage between science and technology that marked a significant change. White notes that “Our science and technology have grown out of Christian attitudes toward man’s relation to nature which are almost universally held not only by Christians” and that this attitude can be summed up as: “We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim.” White’s assessment was that the acceptance of humanity’s technological power over nature “as a normal pattern of action may mark the greatest event in human history since the invention of agriculture.”¹⁰

Fritz Schumacher sought to adapt economics and technology in ways that were illuminated by spiritual traditions and that built communities rather than fragmenting them in the way that Western lifestyles have increasingly tended to do. He wrote: “We shrink back from the truth if we believe that the destructive forces of the modern world can be ‘brought under control’ simply by mobilising more resources – of wealth, education, and research – to fight pollution, to preserve wildlife, to discover new

⁵ John B. Cobb Jr, “Postmodern Christianity in Quest of Eco-Justice,” in Dieter T. Hessel (ed.), *After Nature’s Revolt: Eco-Justice and Theology* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 1992), 21.

⁶ Gordon D. Kaufmann, *In the beginning ... Creativity* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2004), 36.

⁷ White, “Historical Roots,” quoted in Roger Gottlieb, *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 189.

⁸ Alastair McIntosh, *Hell and High Water: Climate Change, Hope and the Human Condition* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2008). See also, for example, Fred Pearce, *The Last Generation: How Nature Will Take Her Revenge for Climate Change* (2nd ed. London: Eden Project Books, 2007).

⁹ Rowan Williams, “[The Climate Crisis: A Christian Response](#),” Operation Noah Annual Lecture, Southwark Cathedral, 13 October 2009, accessed 17 June 2011.

¹⁰ White, “Historical Roots,” quoted in Gottlieb, *This Sacred Earth*, 185.

sources of energy, and to arrive at more effective agreements on peaceful co-existence.”¹¹ White also did not believe that the effects of humanity’s adverse impact on the environment could be adequately mitigated by applying yet more science and technology. Nevertheless, this view is still aired by some.¹²

The challenges

Peak oil

The availability of cheap liquid fuels has allowed a society to develop that has an “ingrained cultural perception that we have the right to go where we want, when we want, and how we want ... [and] to develop a food supply system in which huge amounts of energy are used moving food and other goods around just for the sake of it.”¹³ In 1977, while President of the US, Jimmy Carter urged the West to wean itself off oil. Carter, a committed Christian, charted the eighteenth-century change from wood as the major fuel to coal and the twentieth-century change from coal to oil. He warned: “Because we are now running out of gas and oil, we must prepare quickly for a third change, to strict conservation and to the use of coal and permanent renewable energy sources, like solar power.”¹⁴ But coal is also a finite resource and, like all fossil fuels, its use leads to emissions of damaging carbon dioxide (CO₂).

Peak oil is shorthand for the point when more oil has been extracted than remains available in reserves. [Note: This was the predominant meaning at the time of writing. Peak oil is more often now taken to mean the point at which global crude oil production hits its maximum rate, after which production will start to decline.] Most agree that this point will be passed within the next decade. It is therefore urgent that the *third change* – to renewable energy sources – be addressed at international, national and local levels. When peak oil is reached, there will be “extraordinary levels of change in every aspect of our lives.”¹⁵ Oil supplies *will* eventually run out; it has been somewhere between twenty and thirty years since a year in which more oil was

¹¹ E. F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: A study of economics as if people mattered* (London: Blond & Briggs Ltd, 1973; repr. London: Vintage, 2011), 249.

¹² Martin Rees, “Are we all doomed?”, *New Statesman*, 6 June 2011, 24.

¹³ Hopkins, *Transition Handbook*, 70.

¹⁴ Jimmy Carter, televised speech, 18 April 1977, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/carter-energy/>, accessed 14 March 2011 (no longer available).

¹⁵ Hopkins, *Transition Handbook*, 44.

discovered than was consumed.¹⁶ Extraction of oil is also becoming more destructive of natural habitats, as areas such as tar sands are exploited in an attempt to keep pace with rising world demand.

The developed world is addicted to oil and we currently depend upon it for much of our food, clothing, other consumer goods and travel.^{17, 18} In the affluent nations of the world the appetite for energy “has soared to such an extent that we are now energy obese” and to remedy this “we must look to new technologies that use less energy, improve our lifestyle, and offer irresistible value.”¹⁹

Depletion of the world’s fossil fuel resources has not received much attention in the church.²⁰ Unlike famine and drought, which highlight immediate needs among affected populations and remind us of the importance of seeking a more equitable worldwide distribution of resources, the issues surrounding non-renewable commodities are less tangible. Highlighting oil – a finite resource with depleting reserves – should not obscure the fact that during the lifetime of the so-called Baby Boom generation, now in or approaching their sixties, about half of *all* the non-renewable resources of the planet will have been used.²¹ This century will see falls in: grain production (total and per capita); uranium production; fresh water availability (per capita); arable land in agricultural production; wild fish harvests; and annual extraction of some minerals, including copper, platinum, silver, gold and zinc.²² There are also less easily quantifiable limits to other resources: species diversity; the integrity of the atmosphere, soils and oceans; and the capacity of ecosystems to regenerate.²³

Climate change

Over thirty years ago, White wrote that “our present combustion of fossil fuels threatens to change the chemistry of the globe’s atmosphere as a whole, with

¹⁶ <http://biolog.ca/?p=4>; <http://www.peak-oil-news.info/peak-oil-debate-rages/>, accessed 29 March 2011 (no longer available).

¹⁷ Richard Heinberg, *Peak Everything: Waking up to the Century of Decline in Earth’s Resources* (Forest Row: Clairview, 2007), 135.

¹⁸ Johann Hari, “Demanding cheap petrol is disastrous,” *i*, 11 March 2011, 13.

¹⁹ Peter Tertzakian and Keith Hollihan, *The End of Energy Obesity: Breaking today’s energy addiction for a prosperous and secure tomorrow* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2009), xiii, xv.

²⁰ Ellen Teague, however, includes peak oil in both *Between the Flood and the Rainbow: Climate Change and the Church’s Social Teaching – A Study Guide* (London: Operation Noah, 2008) and a course designed for groups, *Paint the Church Green* (Stowmarket: Kevin Mayhew, 2008).

²¹ Heinberg, *Peak Everything*, 159.

²² *Ibid.*, 4.

²³ Tim Jackson, *Prosperity Without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (London: Earthscan, 2009), 45.

consequences which we are only beginning to guess.”²⁴ Thirty years on, guesswork has been replaced by computer models predicting the probable results of rising emissions of greenhouse gases.²⁵ Anthropogenic – human-induced – climate change has largely resulted from burning fossil fuels and also from deforestation. Forests play a large part in keeping the planet cool by absorbing CO₂. Clearing and burning forests releases CO₂ into the atmosphere; protecting the world’s forests is therefore doubly important in any struggle to deal with global warming.

The 2006 Stern Report concluded that “scientific evidence points to increasing risks of serious, irreversible impacts from climate change” if we proceed without making significant changes.²⁶ Ten years earlier, climate change was already seen as the “single most pervasive and potentially cataclysmic factor in the ecological crisis.”²⁷

One might expect such significant global challenges to have had a major impact on the mission and praxis of churches around the world. However, while “many Christians are committed to discipleship, it is probably true that only a minority of church members and congregations are actively involved in social justice concerns generally and environmental issues specifically.”²⁸ The major UK denominations have issued statements on creation care and for some churchgoers it is no longer seen as “a slightly weird thing, but as an important part of Christian living.” Nevertheless, the understanding and verbal assent that exists is “still largely divorced from our action.”²⁹

The Transition Network

To new parents, *transition* has particular connotations – it describes the shortest but most intense period of labour during a natural childbirth. The major emotional marker for this stage is the desire to give up, and among the physical symptoms is “an inability to relax or be comfortable.” Mothers at this stage of

²⁴ White, “Historical Roots.”

²⁵ Royal Society, *Climate Change Controversies: A simple guide* (London: The Royal Society, 2007), 7.

²⁶ [Stern Review Executive Summary](#), accessed 24 March 2011, iii.

²⁷ Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment & Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 2.

²⁸ David G. Hallman, “Climate Change and Ecumenical Work for Sustainable Community,” in Dieter Hessel and Larry Rasmussen (eds), *Earth Habitat: Eco-Injustice and the Church’s Response* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2001), 131.

²⁹ Ruth Valerio, *‘L’ is for lifestyle: Christian living that doesn’t cost the earth* (rev. ed.; Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 11.

childbirth are emotionally needy, need reassurance, are no longer able to handle things as they were and need to do something different.³⁰

To those concerned about the environment – about the future of the planet that is our home – transition now also has a particular meaning. It sums up the changes needed at all levels of society: the individual, business, government, legislative and international measures required to ensure both mitigation – reduction of greenhouse gas emissions – and adaptation to the consequences of inevitable climate change. The Stern Review talks about “transition to a low-carbon economy.”³¹ Recognising this, the Transition Network is a movement of communities addressing the challenges by starting local in order to nurture a caring culture in which they seek to reclaim the economy, encourage entrepreneurship, reimagine work, reskill and support each other.

There are obvious parallels between the transition phase of childbirth and the transition that communities are engaging with in response to the threats of climate change and peak oil. Change is never easy and can be uncomfortable and threatening; the challenge is to convince people that the outcome will be worth the effort, that something new and exciting is being brought to life. In the church context there is the additional task of making it clear that this *new baby* is no impostor but is central to the healthy life of the church and its gospel witness.

Rob Hopkins, founder of the Transition Network, suggested in 2008 that “the oil age” would come to be seen as the 200-year period that enabled the human race to move away from a primarily local focus and then to move back to it again. The Transition Network knows that it does not have all the answers to the problems of climate change and resource depletion but is committed to Transition, which it describes as “a social experiment on a massive scale.” Its founders are convinced that: “if we wait for the governments, it’ll be too little, too late; if we act as individuals, it’ll be too little; but if we act as communities, it might just be enough, just in time.”³² Among the particular emphases of the Transition movement are resilience and relocalisation. The rebuilding of resilience, such that local communities are able to

³⁰ <http://www.birthingnaturally.net/birth/progress/transition.html>, accessed 15 March 2011 (no longer available).

³¹ Stern Review Executive Summary, xvi.

³² <http://www.transitionnetwork.org/support/what-transition-initiative#disclaimer>, accessed 26 February 2011 (no longer available but this has been quoted elsewhere, for example in A. Whitney Sanford, *Living Sustainably: What Intentional Communities Can Teach Us about Democracy, Simplicity and Nonviolence*, 41).

cope with the stresses imposed by climate change and fuel scarcity, involves ensuring that – in Hopkins’ example – the cake is always produced locally even if the icing and the cherries are imported. Currently, “the cake is imported from wherever in the world it can be found cheapest, and local agriculture produces the icing and the cherries”; we are “precariously unresilient.”³³ Unsustainability is perpetuated by the separation of “food from agrarian culture, nutrition from agricultural production and financial investments from farm and land stewardship,” a fact recognised by theologians as well as by environmentalists.³⁴ The Transition Network is not advocating that local communities become “nothing in, nothing out” economies, but a return to a situation in which whatever can be produced locally is produced locally.

Not everyone agrees. George Monbiot, whose book *Heat* did a great deal to bring the challenge of global warming to a wider audience, has stated that localisation is “both destructive and unjust.”³⁵ His argument is that trade is the best means of distributing wealth between nations, something that is essential if global justice is ever to be achieved.³⁶ Hopkins responds by suggesting that Transition should not be seen as advocating complete localisation but rather “the building of resilience in both worlds, North and South.”³⁷ This is particularly important for a Christian environmental standpoint, which must be compatible with seeking justice and wellbeing for those who are currently disadvantaged.

The focus of the Transition Network then is on community resilience and their publications suggest areas in which steps can be taken to reduce carbon emissions and foster local cohesion.³⁸

Tackling the problems together

The central argument of the Transition Network is that climate change and the implications of attaining peak oil must be addressed together. If world markets are not restrained by legislation to reduce current levels of CO₂ emissions and mitigate the

³³ Hopkins, *Transition Handbook*, 59.

³⁴ Calvin B. DeWitt, “Unsustainable agriculture and land use,” in Robert S. White, ed., *Creation in Crisis: Christian Perspectives on Sustainability* (London: SPCK, 2009), 153.

³⁵ George Monbiot, *Heat: How to stop the planet burning* (London: Allen Lane, 2006).

³⁶ George Monbiot, [“I Was Wrong About Trade.”](#) *George Monbiot* (blog), accessed 10 June 2011.

³⁷ Hopkins, *Transition Handbook*, 69.

³⁸ Chris Bird, *Local Sustainable Homes: How to make them happen in your community* (Foxhole, Devon: Green Books, 2010); Peter North, *Local Money: How to make it happen in your community* (Foxhole, Devon: Green Books, 2010); Tamzin Pinkerton and Rob Hopkins, *Local Food: How to make it happen in your community* (Foxhole, Devon: Green Books, 2009); and Alexis Rowell, *Communities, Councils & a Low-carbon Future: What we can do if governments won’t* (Foxhole, Devon: Green Books, 2010).

effects of climate change then demand for fossil fuels will lead to further extraction of coal for conversion to liquid fuel. Refusing to acknowledge the constraints of declining oil production results in nations, communities and individuals pursuing the sort of economic growth that developed countries have seen since the Industrial Revolution. This is likely to deny poorer countries the opportunity to develop their economies, and is also not essential for the prosperity of the developed world.³⁹ The Transition Network argues that peak oil and climate change are inextricably linked and we need to consider them together if proposed solutions are to have any hope of being effective. Responses should be both top-down and bottom-up – national and international legislation and political measures, together with local community and individual initiatives.⁴⁰ Many of these strategies are echoed in a 2010 publication by the New Economics Foundation.⁴¹

The linkage between fossil fuel use and climate change is increasingly clear, but the Transition Network stands almost alone in working to generate resilience in the face of peak oil *and* climate change and does this in a way that is community-based. It also considers *inner transition*: “Personal awareness and understanding that our outer actions, and therefore the external systems for living that we create, are shaped by our worldview and belief system. Likewise our inner world is affected by the outer world.”⁴² While Transition group members are encouraged to work towards the construction of local Energy Descent Action Plans (EDAPs), it is acknowledged that facing significant changes to life as we currently know it can be traumatic. As philosopher Alain de Botton has said, “We are implicated in a crime we cannot control singly ... we are guilty, but also unusually powerless.”⁴³ To address this, Heart and Soul groups have been formed in a number of Transition Towns.⁴⁴ This aspect of Transition may give rise to suspicion among some Christians – who detect a hint of the New Age about it. However, American Transition trainer Michael Brownlee fears that Transition efforts may not themselves be sustainable, resilient or self-reliant *unless* the sacred is at the heart of all that is done. While Transition is about preparing

³⁹ Jackson, *Prosperity Without Growth*.

⁴⁰ Hopkins, *Transition Handbook*, 75.

⁴¹ Stephen Spratt et al., *The Great Transition* (London: New Economics Foundation, 2010), 94-98.

⁴² Jacqui Hodgson and Rob Hopkins (eds), *Transition in Action: Totnes and District 2030, an Energy Descent Action Plan* (Totnes: Transition Town Totnes, 2010), 302.

⁴³ Alain de Botton, “[A Point of View: Has our relationship with nature changed?](#)”, accessed 23 January 2011.

⁴⁴ Tim Gorringe, “The Transition Town movement,” *Coracle*, Winter 2010/11, 17.

communities for change, he fears that “our preparation is likely to crumble unless we are able to connect with and cultivate the ... healing, and the sacredness that underlies the transition process.”⁴⁵ However, Rob Hopkins has concerns about Brownlee’s analysis, fearing that making explicit connection with the *sacred* – which Brownlee fails to define – risks alienating and bewildering those engaged in Transition and would jeopardise its links with businesses and communities.⁴⁶ There is merit in Hopkins’ argument. While the Transition Network recognises that climate change and resource depletion “are not just caused by a mistake in our technologies” but are a direct result of our worldview and belief system, local groups may label themselves “non-religious, non-profit-making and non-political.” In my experience, as a Christian member of a local Transition group, this has been important for attracting a broad range of people but has not deterred Christians from getting involved.

Heart and Soul groups have added a new dimension to the work of the Transition Network. Alastair McIntosh, writer on social justice and environmental sustainability,⁴⁷ and Buddhist writer and peace, justice and deep ecology advocate Joanna Macy,⁴⁸ have spoken at meetings organised by the Totnes group. This group has also held outdoor celebrations to mark seasons and other festivals.⁴⁹ Such celebrations, encouraging people of faith – alongside their non-believing neighbours – to appreciate and learn more about their local area, were recommended by Peter Owen Jones at a Christian conference in 2011.⁵⁰ They are among a range of things that can foster collaboration between the church and the Transition movement.

Christian Responses to the Threat of Climate Change

Some time before the term *sustainable development* was coined, the concept of sustainability was discussed at a World Council of Churches (WCC) consultation in 1974, where scientists, theologians and economists together responded to the Club

⁴⁵ Michael Brownlee, “The evolution of Transition in the U.S.,” *Post-carbon Institute, Energy Bulletin*, 26 November 2010, <http://www.energybulletin.net/stories/2010-11-26/evolution-transition-us>, accessed 8 January 2011 (no longer available).

⁴⁶ Rob Hopkins, “[A Critical Response to Michael Brownlee’s call for ‘Deep Transition’](#),” accessed 8 January 2011.

⁴⁷ McIntosh, *Hell and High Water*; Alastair McIntosh, *Rekindling Community: Connecting People, Environment and Spirituality* (Foxhole, Devon: Green Books, 2008).

⁴⁸ Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown, *Coming back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1999).

⁴⁹ Hodgson and Hopkins (eds), *Transition in Action*, 245.

⁵⁰ Peter Owen Jones, “[End of the Age of Thorns: Surviving Consumerism](#).” CEL conference, St John’s Church, Waterloo, London, Saturday 5 March 2011, accessed 14 March 2011.

of Rome's report, *Limits to Growth*.⁵¹ This report "sounded an alarm about how natural-resource depletion, pollution, and population growth was placing an intolerable strain on the Earth's resources."⁵² The WCC considered the role of science and technology in the development of human societies. It articulated the idea of *sustainability* – that for humanity to have a viable future there needed to be a vision of development that could be sustained both environmentally and economically. The WCC then formulated a programme on "just, participatory and sustainable societies," linking socio-economic justice and ecological sustainability. This awareness is visible in the work of a number of Christian environmental bodies and "has been a gift to the broader global community."⁵³ The lead given in the 1970s by the WCC has been followed: many of the Christian organisations involved in the environmental movement are both ecumenical and also increasingly open to working with other faith groups. Climate change has become a particular focus for the ecumenical movement in the context of concerns about links between economics and the environment, and the closing decade of the twentieth century saw the development of ecological theology, sometimes called "eco-theology," as a recognised discipline. The WCC's work on climate change – it participates in United Nations negotiations as a non-governmental organisation (NGO) – has been informed by theological reflection.⁵⁴

The ecumenical work described above has had a somewhat anthropocentric slant – focussing on humanity, rather than on *all* life – and while there has been extensive consideration among theologians about the importance of the natural world in the scheme of God's creation, congregations in the churches have been slower to acknowledge that humanity is not the only part of creation for which God cares. The Jewish scholar Moses Maimonides warned almost eight hundred years ago against believing that "all the beings exist for the sake of the existence of humanity. On the contrary, all the other beings too have been intended for their own sakes, and not for the sake of something else."⁵⁵ The prospect of widespread environmental disaster and an increasing realisation that modern consumerism, industrialised production and

⁵¹ Donella H. Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (New York: Universe Books, 1972).

⁵² Hallman, in Hessel and Rasmussen (eds), *Earth Habitat*, 126.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁵⁵ Moses Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed*, part 3, chapter 15, quoted in Roger S. Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 8.

technology-dominated culture threaten the very fabric of human existence have begun to change our thinking. Churches are beginning to weave into their programmes of worship and outreach a thread of creation care and education in environmental Christianity.

In 1998, the Church of England's Lambeth Conference adopted the following principles on the environment. As will be demonstrated below when considering biblical principles in relation to creation care, they each have scriptural origins:

- The covenant of God's love embraces not only human beings but all of creation.
- Creation is everywhere filled with God's sacred presence.
- Human beings are the priests of creation, seeing God's presence in it, and offering creation's worship.
- The Sabbath principle of *enoughness* is a challenge to us to rest from unnecessary consumption.

Eight years later, in 2006, the Church of England launched a national environmental campaign, "Shrinking the Footprint," chaired by the Bishop of London, the Rt Revd Richard Chartres, and warmly endorsed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams. Williams has made many public statements about the environment and he presents his view very clearly on the campaign's website: "For the Church of the 21st century, good ecology is not an optional extra, but a matter of justice. It is therefore central to what it means to be a Christian."⁵⁶

More recently, the Church of England launched a seven-year plan on climate change and the environment entitled "Church and Earth 2009-2016." In his Foreword, Chartres also locates the issues surrounding the environment at the very heart of the gospel:

The work we must all do for the good of the earth, of the poor and of future generations is work to which we are called from the heart of our faith. It is a practical response to the "Micah Challenge": "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"⁵⁷

⁵⁶ <http://www.shrinkingthefootprint.org/>, accessed 4 April 2011 (no longer available – updated information at <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/policy-and-thinking/our-views/environment-and-climate-change>).

⁵⁷ http://www.shrinkingthefootprint.org/misc_lib/14.pdf, page 3, accessed 4 April 2011 (see note at reference 56).

In 2011 the Archbishop of York was involved in the production of Lent study material “exploring the Christian significance of our environment”⁵⁸ and, speaking to an ecumenical audience in March 2011, Anglican vicar Peter Owen Jones called for radical change:

With Christianity being so human possessed over the last thousand years the church – my church – has been fantastically silent when it comes to our relationship with the environment. It simply does not have the heritage to draw on or the language to speak and we need to be honest about that. What we have had over the last thirty years is some incredible theology but this has not reached the pews.⁵⁹

The free churches in the UK have also responded to the environmental crisis. In 2009, the Baptist Union joined the United Reformed Church and the Methodist Church in an environmental network entitled “Creation Challenge.”⁶⁰ Its main priority is “an email newsletter to connect with church people who are active on environmental matters ... to make the care of God’s creation a central part of local church life and witness.” Tellingly, as a Baptist who has been involved in the local church for almost three decades and with local environmental groups for a number of years, I note that this network had received no publicity in my church and I was completely unaware of it. As with the non-denominational programmes and initiatives described below, creation care is not yet seen as a central part of church life. Those whom such networks are designed to reach may not hear about them unless the local clergy are also interested in environmental matters or the local church has a number of *green* Christians seeking out and exchanging such information. In practice, these people appear to be spread rather thinly throughout the churches and often feel isolated and lacking in support.

As has been illustrated already, Christians have done more than just write about the problems facing the planet. There have been a number of responses in the UK aimed at encouraging Christians to engage in both personal lifestyle changes and corporate action. In addition to the work of the Church of England and the free churches described above there are now a number of non-denominational initiatives, some of which are described below.

⁵⁸ Diocese of York, *Give us this day our daily bread: A study course* (York: Diocese of York, 2011).

⁵⁹ Owen Jones, “End of the Age of Thorns.”

⁶⁰ http://www.creationchallenge.org.uk/?page_id=2, accessed 26 April 2011 (no longer available).

Operation Noah

Operation Noah (ON) was the first Christian campaign dedicated to addressing climate change. It “provides focus and leadership in response to the growing threat of catastrophic climate change endangering all of God’s creation.”⁶¹ Founded early this century by Christian Ecology Link (CEL), it later became a joint project of CEL and the Environmental Issues Network of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI). Part of the Climate Alliance, which brings together groups acting on climate change, it aims to be “science-informed, faith-motivated and hope-driven.” ON sees the climate crisis as not only an environmental crisis but as “a moral and spiritual crisis driven by materialism, individualism, greed and unrelenting consumption” based around an ever-shrinking supply of finite fossil fuels, a crisis fuelled by an economy that does not recognise the ecological limits of the planet.⁶² ON rejects the separation of science and religion and encourages the disciplines to “support and mutually reinforce one another.” Operation Noah also believes that people of faith have a unique advantage, being “grounded in *hope* even in the face of extreme adversity.”⁶³ In 2010, along with a range of faith organisations and religious leaders of many traditions, ON developed a seven-year plan describing their aims and proposed action in five areas: education and young people; pastoral care; lifestyles; advocacy; and partnerships.

In the *education* sphere, ON is developing teaching resources and “encouraging schools to draw together their threads of work on climate change ... with an annual climate change report to be written and produced by the pupils.” The hope is that young people will “lead by example in putting climate change at the top of their list of considerations when making decisions about how to live their lives.”⁶²

With regard to *pastoral care*, ON recognises that those who are fearful about, or already suffering the effects of, climate change need support and hope. Hence the organisation’s name. Many of the world’s religions have versions of the biblical story of Noah, from which the organisation takes its name, and both church and secular audiences recognise it. The story involves a call to leadership and action in the face of environmental disaster, and a call to be stewards and custodians of earth’s animal and plant life. “Noah is made responsible for the continuation of what we would call

⁶¹ <http://www.operationnoah.org/mission-statement>, accessed 3 March 2011 (no longer available, but see at <https://operationnoah.org/who-we-are/>).

⁶² [Operation Noah’s Seven-Year Plan for Generational Change](#), accessed 3 March 2011, 2.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

an ecosystem.”⁶⁴ ON has produced resources for churches and community groups, including a study of the Noah story and the case it makes for creation care.

Operation Noah seeks to promote the concept and practice of “Low Carbon Christian Living,” which they see as being a faith version of Transition Towns. It is “a community, as well as an individual response to the climate change impacts of our hitherto carbon-intensive lifestyles.”⁶⁵ ON recognises that the process of changing *lifestyles* involves costs relatively easier for the well-off to bear. Conversely, the damaging effects of climate change are felt most by those in poor societies and by the poorest people in affluent nations. A focus of ON’s work has been a campaign advocating a simpler, less consumer-orientated and more celebratory Christmas. During 2011 ON developed the idea of low-carbon Christian living, working on “standards, actions and resources to support communities in radically reducing their emissions.” They are using lessons learned from the Transition Network and other community activities.

ON’s executive director and campaign strategist both have expertise and experience in *advocacy* and in using the media. The seven-year plan incorporates publicising the need for lower-carbon living and making clear the benefits and advantages of “simpler living, and living in community with each other, with our faith traditions and with our environment.”⁶⁶

Although a relatively young organisation, ON has already established links with a number of other bodies. It will continue working in *partnerships* with others in the religious, scientific and campaigning communities to share information, developing a high-level message on climate change that can be presented to the public, the media and policy-makers.

Eco-Congregation

Eco-Congregation is an ecumenical programme helping churches link environmental issues and Christian faith, and “respond in practical action in the church, in the lives of individuals, and in the local and global community.”⁶⁷ It began as a partnership between the Government-funded environmental charity ENCAMS (Environmental Campaigns) and the Environmental Issues Network of CTBI. Eco-Congregation was dedicated at St Paul’s Cathedral in September 2000. Within two

⁶⁴ Williams, “Climate Crisis.”

⁶⁵ *Operation Noah’s Seven-Year Plan*, 8.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 11. (See also Update section.)

⁶⁷ <http://www.ecocongregation.org/>, accessed 21 February 2011.

years about 200 churches had carried out an environmental check-up, by March 2002 the first Eco-Congregation award had been presented and by mid-2011 there were over 200 award-winning churches. In 2007 Eco-Congregation's management in England transferred to A Rocha UK, a Christian environmental and nature conservation movement.⁶⁸ A Rocha is "driven by biblical theology. It's not a Christian attempt to 'save the planet.' It's a response to who God is."⁶⁹ A Rocha undertakes projects that are often cross-cultural in character and have a community emphasis; their focus is on science and research, practical conservation and environmental education. It is committed to engaging churches through challenging them to reread the Scriptures and rediscover the message of creation care that has always been there but often ignored.⁷⁰ In the US a similar approach to Eco-Congregation's has been adopted by Eco-Justice Ministries, helping churches to *go green* on the basis that this is "good for the church, good for the movement, and good for Earth."⁷¹

Eco-Congregation produces a wealth of resources in thirteen modules that churches can use in seeking Eco-Congregation status. The first module is a church check-up, to help identify and affirm a church's current good practice and prioritise future activities. The second module is for worship groups and leaders and includes prayers and reflections around seven environmental themes. It also lists particularly appropriate hymns and anthems for including creation care in worship. Module 3 provides theological perspectives for discussion groups and sermons, encouraging churches to link ecology and Christianity and to see creation care clearly in the Bible. The fourth module has ideas and activities for children's work. Module 5 is designed for use with youth groups and module 6 comprises an address and Bible studies for home groups who want to look at Christianity, environment and ecology. The seventh module contains guidelines relating to church premises and the eighth covers the management of finances, catering and purchasing. Module 9 deals with church grounds and other land and module 10 is about challenging individuals to make lifestyle changes. The eleventh module has ideas to help churches introduce

⁶⁸ <http://www.arocha.org/gb-en/aboutarocha.html>, accessed 21 February 2011 (no longer available, see instead <https://www.arocha.org/en/a-rocha-uk/>). (Note: While Eco-Congregation still operates as described here in Scotland and Northern Ireland, it has been replaced by the similar but updated scheme, Eco Church, in England and Wales.)

⁶⁹ Andy Crouch, "The Joyful Environmentalists: Eugene Peterson and Peter Harris," *Christianity Today* 55(6) (June 2011), 30.

⁷⁰ Dave Bookless, personal communication, 18 May 2011.

⁷¹ <http://www.eco-justice.org/>, accessed 21 February 2011.

environmental issues into their work with, through and for the local community and the twelfth has resources to help churches think globally and act locally. The final module is to help churches understand climate change and what they can do to reduce their carbon footprint.

When a church has completed its initial check-up and identified a range of possible actions it can use these resources to put them into practice. The Eco-Congregation award is then given to churches that have undertaken activities or set up initiatives in three areas:

- spiritual: worship and teaching – linking environmental issues with the Christian faith through services, children’s work or adult groups
- practical: practising what is preached through an energy, churchyard or recycling project
- mission: reaching out to the local community on environmental issues by organising a project with a school or other group and gaining positive publicity.

Two or three years after receiving an Eco-Congregation award, a church needs to demonstrate afresh that its work is ongoing and that new things are being done. As of June 2011, twenty-one churches had obtained a second award and three have their third award. The last award in 2010 was for the diocesan office of Ripon & Leeds Diocese, the first move towards becoming an Ecodiocese. Launched in May 2010, the Ecodiocese award scheme will “recognise the efforts of those dioceses who are giving a lead in encouraging and supporting their parishes’ efforts to become more spiritually and practically aware of creation care.”⁷² This is an important move, because encouragement and support for congregations is generally in short supply from the church hierarchy. The environmental message is not reaching the parishes and in the Church of England it tends to depend on the interest – or suffer from a lack of it – of the bishop in each diocese.⁷³ Some dioceses are active: Oxford, for example, has an environment section on its website, hosts another website entitled “Earthing Faith: connecting faith to the earth,” as well as a range of projects and programmes taking

⁷² <http://www.arocha.org/gb-en/8689-DSY.html?branch=1&language=en>, accessed 25 February 2011 no longer available, see instead <https://ecochurch.arocha.org.uk/denominational-awards/eco-diocese/>.

⁷³ John Whitehead, personal communication, 8 May 2011.

place in the parishes.⁷⁴ However, this is the exception rather than the rule. There are more than 16,000 Anglican churches in the UK, so there is a long way to go before a significant proportion of this one denomination are recognised as Eco-Congregations.

Christian Ecology Link

Christian Ecology Link (CEL) was set up twenty-eight years ago to support Christians who consider creation care to be central to their faith. It offers insights into ecology and the environment to Christian people and churches and offers Christian insights to the Green movement.⁷⁵ CEL publishes a twice-yearly magazine, *Green Christian*, “intended as a forum for Christians of all traditions to reflect on and contribute to current thinking in the green movement.”⁷⁶ CEL encourages churches to engage with Transition and Eco-Congregation and also arranges events, publishes a range of electronic and paper resources, and participates in the Stop Climate Chaos coalition. It encourages members in their *green* church activities and has developed ecocell, a modular programme launched in 2009 enabling groups to discover ways to live more sustainably. An expanded version, ecocell 2, was launched in late 2010 as “a Christian *journey or pilgrimage* to an actual *destination* – sustainable living, undertaken over a *number of years*.”⁷⁷ It comprises a number of units or modules, covering food, domestic energy use, personal travel, other purchasing and consumption and “people power.” There is a core module, to which participants return after explorations into other areas and the other modules are introduced as members are ready to explore how best to reduce their emissions in particular areas. All modules contain biblical and theological reflection. As a means of encouraging groups to move towards sustainable living, the ecocell programme, although primarily developed for faith-based groups, is endorsed by the Transition Network, who include a link to it on their own website.

It is through CEL that a bridge has been established between the Transition Town movement and green or environmental Christianity.

Churches in Transition

Churches in Transition (CiT) was established in 2009 by Christian Ecology Link, which recognised that “the rapid emergence of the Transition Town movement

⁷⁴ <http://www.earthingfaith.org>, accessed 11 June 2011 (no longer available, see instead <https://www.oxford.anglican.org/mission-ministry/making-a-difference/environment/>).

⁷⁵ <http://www.christian-ecology.org.uk/whatcel.htm>, accessed 21 February 2011. (Note: Christian Ecology Link has since been renamed Green Christian.)

⁷⁶ <http://www.christian-ecology.org.uk/gc/index.htm>, accessed 23 February 2011.

⁷⁷ <http://www.christian-ecology.org.uk/amm-2010.htm>, accessed 14 April 2011.

presents both a challenge and an opportunity to local churches.” The aim was “to enable CEL members and other ‘green’ Christians to get their churches linked in” with the movement and to encourage “practical responses at an individual and community level.”⁷⁸ There have been instances of “people involved in Transition Towns being suspicious of Christians getting involved, seeing Christianity more as one of the causes of the problem rather than the solution (and perhaps fearing that Christians may wish to attempt to ‘convert’ others). And similarly, some Christians see Transition Towns as being marginal to the bigger topic of saving souls.”⁷⁹ Nevertheless, CEL decided that it could provide a useful forum for mutual support and the exchange of ideas. In November 2009, it hosted a day conference on Transition Towns. The conference was addressed by Ben Brangwyn, co-founder of the Transition Network, who suggested that “people of faith are in a position to shift the usual ‘green gloom and doom’ scenario from crisis to opportunity” by working together to make a difference. “To do it alone is too little, to wait on Government will be too late.”⁸⁰ Professor Tim Gorringer gave a theological reflection on the Transition movement and the rethinking of what it is to be God’s people. He referred to the *Transition Handbook* as “being so unbelievably positive and not about frightening people into change” and suggested that the church’s role in Transition is prophetic, with all of humanity being called to share in the shaping of God’s world.⁸¹ Also revealed at this conference was the frustration experienced by those attempting to get their local churches involved in Transition. In Spring 2011, CEL’s website listed only twenty locations where CEL members are involved in their local Transition Town initiative. In March 2011, Brangwyn – who professes no personal religious faith – issued a very specific challenge to faith leaders to work together in response to the challenges posed by the combination of “ecological meltdown, economic downturn and increasing inequality within and between nations.”⁸² Such initiatives involving

⁷⁸ Laura Deacon, “Transformation in Action,” *Green Christian* 67 (Summer 2009), 6, 7.

⁷⁹ George Dow, personal communication, 19 April 2011.

⁸⁰ Jerry and Sue Barr, “[Christian Ecology Link annual conference](#),” accessed 17 March 2011.

⁸¹ Barr and Barr, “Christian Ecology Link annual conference.”

⁸² Ben Brangwyn, “[The faith movie we’ve all been waiting for](#),” blog post dated 25 March 2011. In this spoof review Brangwyn describes a film in which faith representatives speak with “personal, emotional and intellectual honesty” about confronting and addressing the environmental crisis and helping their congregations to understand and respond to the issues. At the end he reveals that no such film has yet been made but that he issues “a call to our religious leaders, all of you, to step up to the challenge and breathe life into this little idea that could show us what authentic leadership is all about, empowering each of us to manifest just such leadership as we reshape our lives, our communities, our institutions and our world.”

Christians may in turn have a mission impact; A Rocha often finds that “when Christians take the earth seriously, people take the gospel seriously.”⁸³

A much wider engagement by Christian people in environmental organisations, the Transition Town movement, conservation charities and in local and national government, where helpful and important legislation can be framed, is to be encouraged. Churches can support this as part of whole-life discipleship. However, it needs to be underpinned by an emphasis across all denominations on the biblical teaching that can enthuse and inform people, bringing creation care into the limelight as a central message of the gospel. Love of God and love of neighbour are not consistent with environmental destruction or wasteful, exploitative lifestyles. In accord with the aims of the Transition movement, theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether recognises the “need to phase out petroleum and other fossil fuels as the primary energy sources” and to control emissions. She also affirms that healthy societies are those that “can be sustained from season to season” and should no longer be “building up toxicities of destruction.”⁸⁴

Biblical Principles

From where in the biblical narrative – from where in the gospel message of Christianity – does faith-engaged environmentalism draw its resources? What are the theological underpinnings that need to be reinforced and given new impetus in the teaching of the church if people of faith are going to be encouraged to be at the forefront of local, community, national and international initiatives aimed at tackling climate change and resource depletion? Wendell Berry, poet and essayist, has said that if we read the Bible we will discover that “our destruction of nature is not just bad stewardship, or stupid economics, or a betrayal of family responsibility; it is the most horrid blasphemy.”⁸⁵ He believes that “Christian complicity” in the plunder of the planet comes from a failure to truly understand the Bible. While his own lifestyle is consistent with his message – “rooted in place and community” and offering “humility and closeness to the earth” – he acknowledges that his is just one voice among many on the environmental crisis.⁸⁶ His is a voice, however, that resonates

⁸³ Dave Bookless, “Unequally Yoked? Why A Rocha is happy to work alongside those of different beliefs,” *A Rocha*, No. 28 (Autumn 2008), 15.

⁸⁴ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 258-259.

⁸⁵ Wendell Berry, “Christianity and the Survival of Creation,” *Cross Currents* (1993), 151-152.

⁸⁶ Ragan Sutterfield, “Imagining a different way to live,” *Christianity Today* (November 2006), 63.

with the central themes of the Transition movement when he highlights our addiction to consumer goods, disconnection from the land and reckless wastefulness.⁸⁷

Although the Bible makes it clear in a number of places that the story of humanity and of the earth is closely linked, the obvious starting point for a theological reflection on creation care is with the creation narratives of Genesis. This leads on to other themes within Scripture that convey key biblical principles for environmental care.

Creation

The first creation narrative (Gen 1:1 – 2:3) provides grounds for believing that all creation is good because it is loved by God⁸⁸; furthermore, it is through God's love that all creation gains its worth.⁸⁹ God cares about the environment.⁹⁰ God affirms the goodness of vegetation (Gen 1:12) and of living creatures (Gen 1:21, 25). The glory of God is reflected in the extravagance and diversity of creation: "as God gives structure to the heavens and earth and fills up the emptiness with diversity, the repeated refrain is that God saw that it was good."⁹¹ This diversity is threatened by human greed when we do not respect the world as God's creation. The main thrust of the first creation story is not to explain how creation came into existence but to instil a sense of wonder – not to encourage praise of creation but to invite the reader to worship the Creator.⁹² However, this narrative also contains the phrase that has been used by humanity to justify its domination of the natural world, a phrase that suggests that "in the diversity and extravagance of God's creative activity ... the high point" is the creation of human beings.⁹³ In Gen 1:26-27 humans are given a divine mandate to rule over all other creatures and are described as being made "in the image of God." Wilkinson reviews various understandings of the image of God and lays more emphasis on the creative process than on what it constitutes to be human. He draws on an understanding of the image as a representative of the one imaged ("the presence of an absent lord") and concludes that the Bible sees the special nature of humanity

⁸⁷ Tim Vivian, "Reflection: Building and Upholding the Blessed Community: In Praise of Wendell Berry," *Anglican Theological Review* 83(4) (2001), 828, 831.

⁸⁸ Diane Jacobson, "Biblical Bases for Eco-Justice Ethics" in Dieter T. Hessel, ed., *Theology for Earth Community: A Field Guide* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 45.

⁸⁹ Celia Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2008), 86.

⁹⁰ Nick Spencer and Robert White, *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living* (London: SPCK, 2007), 78-80.

⁹¹ David Wilkinson, *The Message of Creation* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2002), 29.

⁹² James A. Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1992), 97.

⁹³ Wilkinson, *Message of Creation*, 33.

as the relationship with the Creator that God has given us. The focus is not on human beings as the pinnacle of God's creative work but on the Creator who delights in relationship and whose nature is reflected in creation.⁹⁴ On the basis of work by Jewish scholars, Hodson also concludes that "by creating us in his image, [God] did not give a justification for the desecration of the rest of creation but rather gave us a responsibility for it. This view helpfully preserves a distinction between humans and other creatures within the context of our accountability to God for our care of creation."⁹⁵

A fundamental connection between humankind and the very substance of the earth is made clear in the second creation story (Gen 2:4-25), where we read that it is through soil that the forces of life and death work.⁹⁶ God made the first human being out of the earth (*adamah*, Gen 2:7) and, after they had disobeyed God and eaten of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the first humans were told that they would return to the soil (Gen 3:19). The liturgy for burial services in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer uses the words from Gen 3 and in the phrase "dust to dust" we routinely, but unthinkingly, acknowledge our close ties with the earth. Without soil, humans and other living organisms could not survive. It is crucially important for life – it is the ultimate source of virtually everything that we eat – and the land's vulnerability to human activity was documented by both Homer and Plato and the Hebrew Bible (for example, Lev 25:4-5).

Wirzba suggests that "scriptural accounts of creation tell a surprisingly honest and current story of the need for character reformation and development, all with an eye to the health and wholeness of creation."⁹⁷ However, the church has failed to fully recognise the relationship between God and nature.⁹⁸ Many ideas embedded in Christianity (or imported into it) caused this failure. One is the influence of Greek ideas that God is impassive – a divine being who cannot be touched by emotion or events and who is completely separate from and uncontaminated by creation. Second is the anthropocentric view that places humanity centre stage with the natural world

⁹⁴ Ibid., 36-39.

⁹⁵ Margot Hodson, "[Environmental Christianity: insights from our Jewish heritage](#)," JRI Briefing Papers No. 13, accessed 7 August 2020.

⁹⁶ Or as Ellen F. Davis puts it: "*Adamah* is the source of life for *adam*" in "Just food: a biblical perspective on culture and agriculture," in White, ed., *Creation in Crisis*, 123.

⁹⁷ Norman Wirzba, *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), ix.

⁹⁸ Ian Bradley, *God is Green: Ecology for Christians* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3.

as a resource to be exploited; in this view, God is the God of history (*historical*) rather than the Lord of all creation (*cosmological*). Then there is the influence of gnosticism, the belief that matter is intrinsically evil and that only the spiritual is of importance. Although officially the church has rejected both Manicheism, a dualism between good and evil, and Platonism, a dualism between soul and body, it nevertheless lingers in the attitude encountered by many green Christians – that the church should concentrate on saving souls rather than saving the planet. That the health and wholeness of *all* creation (a state of total wellbeing summarised in the biblical narrative by the word *shalom*) should be a goal of the Christian life has not gained full acceptance.

Creation was not a one-off and finished event; it is an ongoing process in which we are called to participate as co-creators with God, as his agents participating “in the redemption of a suffering creation.”⁹⁹ Furthermore, Scripture itself reveals not only that God’s creative work is continuous but also that “God responds to what has been created.”¹⁰⁰ Kaufman goes further and develops a way of thinking of God as “the serendipitous creativity manifest in the world.”¹⁰¹ The biblical story of “God’s work as creator and sustainer of the Universe needs to be held together with his future work of new creation.”¹⁰² New creation is God’s ongoing work – pictured in Isa 65:17-25 and in Rom 8:18-25 as well as in Rev 21 – and in what we do we can either contribute to or detract from the divine work.¹⁰³

Nash reminds us that the first formalised statements of Christian belief – the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds – open with a declaration of God’s role as Creator of all things and that this is the foundation for all that follows.¹⁰⁴ These statements are “an affirmation of divine sovereignty, universal providence, creaturely dependence, and – implicitly and recessively – ecological responsibility.”¹⁰⁵

In the accounts in Gen 1 and 2 we find descriptions of creation that link ecology and economy in “a community of earth, animal, humanity, and God.”¹⁰⁶ So, while Scripture may not directly address the modern issues of climate change or

⁹⁹ Wirzba, *Paradise of God*, 18.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰¹ Kaufman, *In the beginning*, 49.

¹⁰² Wilkinson, *Message of Creation*, 217

¹⁰³ Wirzba, *Paradise of God*, 14.

¹⁰⁴ Sean McDonagh, *To Care for the Earth: A call to a new theology* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1986) 117.

¹⁰⁵ Nash, *Loving Nature*, 95.

¹⁰⁶ Wirzba, *Paradise of God*, 24.

resource depletion it nevertheless gives general pointers about how humanity should relate to the rest of the creation. “It is not enough to know that our lives depend on other natural organisms and processes. We need to know how to live out our interdependence responsibly and in the context of what all living is finally for ... Within western religious traditions it is the doctrine of creation that plays the primary role in helping us define the origin, purpose, and goal of life.”¹⁰⁷

Susan Power Bratton suggests, however, that working in, with or for creation – practical grassroots contact with the natural world – is itself spiritually beneficial and advances holiness or righteousness.¹⁰⁸ Using familiar stories from the Bible, Anne Richards explores how such engagement with the natural world – even just tending a garden or keeping pets – shapes and changes us as people.¹⁰⁹ On this assessment, Christian practice in relation to the environment might be motivated by “an anticipation of experiencing the divine.”¹¹⁰ These two contrasting views of the *worth* of creation – as the object of God’s love and as a resource for humanity’s spiritual development and growth – both suggest that humanity’s position with regard to the whole created order is one of relationship rather than of dominion, domination, exploitation or control. Just as relationship is at the heart of God – the perichoretic relationship within and between the Trinity – so relationship is at the heart of all that God has created. This view is endorsed by Celia Deane-Drummond, who argues for an understanding of the Genesis account that treats non-human life as participating alongside God in creativity. So the earth responds to God’s will and Word by bringing forth particular plants and creatures (Gen 1:11, 24).¹¹¹

The Genesis accounts of creation have been used in the past to justify an attitude of domination and exploitation on the part of humankind. At their heart, however, is a command to human creatures to behave responsibly and in loving care towards non-human creatures and the planet that sustains both humans and non-humans alike. Only in so doing can people fulfil their original mandate of imaging God to the world.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 12, 13.

¹⁰⁸ Susan Power Bratton, “The New Christian Ecology,” in James Sterba, ed., *Earth Ethics* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), 261-265.

¹⁰⁹ Anne Richards, “Natural partners,” *Country Way* 47 (2008), 13.

¹¹⁰ Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 16.

¹¹¹ Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology*, 86-87.

¹¹² Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2010), 30.

Stewardship

In 1995, Calvin DeWitt set out four basic ecological principles from the Bible – which he described as teachings having “great ecological import” – together with four human behaviour principles.¹¹³ He later combined these into seven biblical arguments for the *stewardship* of creation:

1. *We must keep the creation as God keeps us.* Humanity’s “*earth-keeping*” (Genesis 2:15) mirrors God’s keeping of humankind (Numbers 6:24-26). Dominion – not domination – is exercised by humanity joining with the Creator in caring for the land.
2. *We must be disciples of the last Adam, not the first.* The vocation of humanity is to share in Christ’s restoration and reconciliation of all things.
3. *We must provide for the Sabbath rest of creation.* Sabbath principles apply to the land as well as to humans and animals (Exodus 20:8-11; 23:10-12); they protect the land from “relentless exploitation” and set “moral limits prior to reaching biological and physical limits.”¹¹⁴
4. *We may enjoy, but not destroy, the grace of God’s good creation.* In Genesis 1 God blesses the creatures of land and sea with *fruitfulness*. While expected to enjoy creation and to partake of its fruit, humankind may not destroy the fruitfulness upon which creation’s fullness depends. While human beings are commanded to increase from their original number (Genesis 1:28), so also are other living creatures (Genesis 1:22). Human fruitfulness must not be accomplished at the expense of the rest of creation.
5. *We must seek first the kingdom, not self-interest.* Fulfilment is a consequence of seeking the kingdom (Matthew 6:33). Matthew 6:25-33 makes clear that the priority for humankind is seeking the way of God rather than chasing after material well-being or accumulating the fruits of creation.
6. *We must seek contentment as our great gain.* There are *limits* on humanity’s role within creation. Not even in the very beginning were the first humans content with the “good” provision that God had created for them in Eden – dissatisfaction is

¹¹³ Calvin B. DeWitt, “Ecology and Ethics: Relation of Religious Belief to Ecological Practice in the Biblical Tradition,” *Biodiversity and Conservation* 4 (1995), 838-848.

¹¹⁴ Calvin B. DeWitt, “Biodiversity and the Bible,” *Global Biodiversity* 6(4) (1997), 16.

inherent within fallen human nature but God calls us all, like Paul, to learn the secret of being content (Philippians 4:12b).

7. *We must not fail to act on what we know is right.* There must be a strong link between belief and action when it comes to stewardship for creation. We must *do* the truth, making God's love for the world evident by our own actions.¹¹⁵

However, if the church is to collaborate with others in addressing questions of creation care, we need to acknowledge a problem associated with talking about responsible Christian environmental care purely in terms of stewardship. This is despite the fact that adopting a stewardship model like DeWitt's would undoubtedly lead to "a vast improvement over our current practice."¹¹⁶

Stewardship is suggested not only in Genesis – "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it"¹¹⁷ – but elsewhere in Scripture. Psalm 115:16, for example, says, "The highest heavens belong to the LORD, but the earth he has given to the human race." Stewardship "captures some elements of this responsibility to care for creation,"¹¹⁸ but as generally understood it is management of an inanimate thing rather than the caring relationship that is suggested by the kingship model in Genesis. In Gen 1:28, God told humans to "rule over" the fish, birds and "every living creature that moves on the ground." Spencer and White connect this directly with the statement that humans were made in "the image of God" and suggest that as God's image we are his representatives on earth, ruling on his behalf but also accountable to him. This rule is therefore likened to that of a shepherd or servant king¹¹⁹ and "directed entirely to the benefit of God's kingdom and glory."¹²⁰

Our modern understanding of stewardship essentially involves "wisely and responsibly"¹²¹ looking after something for the long-term benefit of humankind; the planet and all non-human life on it is thus effectively regarded primarily as a resource. But it is "not merely a resource, even a resource given by the Creator. For we cannot 'wound' a resource; nor can we be part of a 'mutually supportive community' with

¹¹⁵ Based on DeWitt, "Ecology and Ethics," 838-848 and Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology*, 83-84.

¹¹⁶ Gottlieb, *Greener Faith*, 20.

¹¹⁷ Gen 2:15, *Today's New International Version*.

¹¹⁸ Spencer and White, *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living*, 84.

¹¹⁹ Jacobson, "Biblical Bases for Eco-Justice Ethics," 46-47.

¹²⁰ Spencer and White, *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living*, 83-85.

¹²¹ Gottlieb, *Greener Faith*, 92.

one.”¹²² And the biblical account calls us to be in this latter sort of relationship – a community – with all of creation. In the twenty-first century, in industrialised, consumption-orientated societies all over the world, “most of us have lost touch with the natural world: we need to reconnect with the planet.”¹²³

Bauckham acknowledges the particular value of the stewardship principle – that it provides “a strong alternative to the idea of the human role in creation as domination and exploitation,” but he also has a number of criticisms of it.¹²⁴ He points out that if our modern idea of stewardship involves humans considering “themselves to have controlling charge over the Earth” then this is, consciously or not, a hubristic notion, “since the facts of human knowledge and power do not measure up to such a role.”¹²⁵ Furthermore, human stewardship does not acknowledge God’s continuing involvement with creation – and some advocates of stewardship “have even suggested that God has entirely delegated his governance of the world to humans,”¹²⁶ a view not supported by the Bible. Bauckham’s central criticism, however, is that stewardship as a concept places humanity *over* creation, rather than *within* it, while the Genesis narratives “place humans unambiguously within creation.”¹²⁷ Like Bauckham, Northcott sees – at the heart of the ecological crisis – humanity’s failure to recognise themselves as “creatures, contingently embedded in networks of relationship with other creatures, and with the Creator.”¹²⁸

Aldo Leopold went further than this in his “land ethic,” which envisages land itself as a community; he therefore set out a challenge – that we should “ask what moral demands nature puts on us and how we may be responsible to it and not merely for it.”¹²⁹ In seeking justice “for all the earth,” Marlow provides a third alternative to the anthropocentric and ecocentric: drawing on the theocentric outlook of the Old Testament she places God, humanity and non-human creation in a triangular framework in which each affect and interact with the others.¹³⁰ Humanity’s use of the

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Mark Edwards, in *Hard Rain: Our Headlong Collision with Nature* (DVD) (Still Pictures Moving Words, 2006).

¹²⁴ Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 2.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 6.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 7.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 27.

¹²⁸ Michael S. Northcott, *A Moral Climate: The ethics of global warming* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2007), 16.

¹²⁹ Judith N. Scoville, “Leopold’s Land Ethic and Ecotheology,” *Ecotheology* 8 (2000), 70.

¹³⁰ Hilary Marlow, “Justice for all the earth: society, ecology and the biblical prophets,” in White, ed., *Creation in Crisis*, 193.

land and its creatures is part of a fundamental interdependence that is at the heart of creation but there is a need for a renewed understanding of the limits to that use that are established in the Bible.

Rule and dominion as biblical concepts in relation to creation have had almost exclusively negative connotations since the work of Lynn White.¹³¹ However, they should be seen in context and not in isolation: “to be fully human ... is to rule over the Earth in a way that reflects our role as God’s vice-regents”; dominion is to be exercised “through servanthood.”¹³² Stewardship, then, is an important principle that seeks to encapsulate this way of interpreting the Genesis commands. Indeed, Padilla suggests that the solution to global warming lies in exchanging “the materialistic intemperance intrinsic to the current economic system for the moral temperance derived from the recognition of humankind’s role as the steward of creation.”¹³³ However, there is a further principle in the Genesis narrative that speaks to the current environmental situation: *covenant*.

Covenant

The Priestly writer, source of the first Genesis creation account, also relates the wickedness of humanity, God’s decision to destroy all humankind (save Moses and his family), and the flood. The flood story highlights a recurring biblical theme – “other creatures also suffer because of human greed and sinfulness.”¹³⁴ Following the flood, God renews the command of Gen 1:28 but this time, as we see in Gen 9:8-17, “the covenant is entered into not merely with humans but with all creation.”¹³⁵ Noah represents a new beginning, a second creation.

Robert Murray, who has made a particular study of the covenant theme and traces it through the Bible, notes its key components of justice and peace. He suggests that covenant has ecological as well as spiritual relevance to the world today, and demonstrates that both “abuse of the Earth and exploitation of the poor” are “against the Cosmic Covenant.”¹³⁶ Rowan Williams has also said we should not imagine “that God’s covenant means that we have a blank cheque where the created world is concerned ... God’s promise has immediate and specific implications about how we

¹³¹ See “Background” section above.

¹³² Spencer and White, *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living*, 85.

¹³³ C. René Padilla, “Globalization, ecology and poverty,” in White, ed., *Creation in Crisis*, 181.

¹³⁴ Sean McDonagh, *The Death of Life: The Horror of Extinction* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2004), 87.

¹³⁵ Sean McDonagh, *The Greening of the Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990), 124.

¹³⁶ Graham Harvey, review of Robert Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant: Biblical Themes of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation*, SJT 50 (1997): 123-124.

behave towards all living beings, human and non-human. It is not a recipe for complacency or passivity.”¹³⁷

Covenant played a central role in the history of God’s chosen people, the nation of Israel, and the prophets repeatedly challenged them to return to keeping faith with the covenant – warning them when they had forgotten it. In Hos 2 and Jer 31 the movements of the earth and sun, day and night and the seasons are all linked with God’s promise and with his “covenantal demands for human justice.”¹³⁸ Scripture narrates the understanding that when we fail to keep the covenant, when we fail to “act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly” with our God (Mic 6:8), then “nature responds as a creation out of sync with its creatures.”¹³⁹ Israel understood that the earth would react if the nation betrayed its responsibilities under the covenant and that its rebellion would result in an earth that was “waste and void” (Jer 4:23-26).¹⁴⁰ As Christians, we are also in a covenant relationship and therefore “have a responsibility to live with an awareness of blessings or curses for our actions towards God’s earth. We are also called to speak against others who would misuse God’s earth, and warn them of the consequences of their actions.”¹⁴¹

Sabbath

According to rabbinic literature, creation was not entirely finished on the sixth day because the *menuha*, the “rest” or *shabat* of God, remained uncreated until the seventh day.¹⁴² So although in the Septuagint version Genesis 2:1-2 tells us that heavens and earth were finished on the sixth day, God’s creative work was finished only on the seventh day. Viewing creation as taking seven days and not six “we could conclude that God viewed the need for rest as an integral part of creation itself.”¹⁴³ According to Moltmann then, “the whole work of creation was performed *for the sake of the sabbath*.”¹⁴⁴ This calls into question the long-held anthropocentric assumption that creation exists primarily for the benefit of humanity, although it should be noted that there is some biblical foundation for this view. Not only in the first, Priestly, creation narrative (Gen 1:28), but also in Ps 8 (verse 6) it is clear that creation is given

¹³⁷ Williams, “Climate Crisis.”

¹³⁸ Jacobson, “Biblical Bases for Eco-Justice Ethicism,” 49.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

¹⁴¹ Hodson, “Environmental Christianity.”

¹⁴² Wirzba, *Paradise of God*, 35.

¹⁴³ Hodson, “Environmental Christianity.”

¹⁴⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (London: SCM, 1985), 277.

to humankind. But this gift does not imply that we have the right to unrestricted use of creation: “the practical effect of Sabbath observance is to remind us that the creation is never ours but is forever God’s.” If God’s rest, rather than humanity, is understood as the climax of creation then the purpose of the Sabbath is more easily seen as creating “the space and time in which the eternal joy of creation can become temporarily concrete.”¹⁴⁵ There is a connection then between the destruction of creation and the neglect of Sabbath observance. The pain of creation – both human and non-human – is the result of creation gone awry, creation that has not and is not living out its inner truth and meaning. In the Sabbath “creation finds its fulfillment, goal, and purpose.”¹⁴⁶

We must learn to see that the deterioration of the earth, which consists of the weakening or destruction of the natural conditions that enable habitats and organisms to grow and heal themselves, finds its necessary corollary in social deterioration and injustice. Social justice, we might say, goes hand in hand with ecological justice, since both depend on the human identification with and sympathy for the communal conditions that make for a complete life. The prospect of justice, however, depends on the articulation and implementation of a uniquely human identity and vocation that in seeking the well-being of others, human and non-human, discovers joy and peace.¹⁴⁷

The Sabbath as the completion of creation combined with the Sabbath as the revelation of God’s existence resting in his creation points to a future in which God’s creation and his revelation will be one: that is, redemption. So redemption is both “the eternal sabbath” and “the new creation.” “When ‘the whole earth is full of his glory’ [Isa 6:3], when God is ‘all in all’ [1 Cor 15:28, KJV] and when God ‘dwells in his whole creation’ [Rev 21:3], then creation and revelation are truly one. God is then manifest in the whole creation, and the whole creation is the manifestation and mirror of his glory: that is the redeemed world.”¹⁴⁸

For Israel, the land was at the heart of their identity as the people of God and it was the law of the Sabbath that provided them with the moral principles intended to guide their agricultural and economic life. The prophet Jeremiah identifies Israel’s neglect of divine law, but in particular the Sabbath law, as the reason behind Jerusalem’s downfall; the nation’s exile in Babylon was a punishment for failing to

¹⁴⁵ Wirzba, *Paradise of God*, 36.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴⁸ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 288.

care for the land.¹⁴⁹ Northcott sees a failure of Sabbath observance as linked to the present disordered economy of work and leisure. He suggests that a day set aside for rest and contemplation serves as a reminder that life does not come from our work but from the Creator and from the lifecycles of the cosmos.¹⁵⁰

Moltmann argues that in Jesus' actions on the Sabbath – in healing the sick and allowing his disciples to work – Jesus was not flouting the Sabbath law but was proclaiming the arrival of the messianic age (cf Luke 4:18). This age brought with it the freedom with regard to the law that had been promised by the prophets: “Jesus’ proclamation of the imminent kingdom makes the whole of life a sabbath feast.”¹⁵¹ And if the whole of life is indeed a Sabbath feast then by implication the whole of life involves a call to share in the outworking of all that Sabbath entails in terms of working for justice and peace for all creation.

As with holding to the covenant, many of the prophets “made observance of the Sabbath a prerequisite for the restoration of the land and Israel as a people of God.”¹⁵² Together with the extension of Sabbath seen in the principle of Jubilee (Lev 25:8-55), the Sabbath decrees of Exod 23:10-12 bring together respect for the sovereignty of God, “care for the earth, concern for the poor, [and] sensitivity to the needs of both wild and farm animals.”¹⁵³ Sabbath, then, is a further key biblical principle for any Christian environmental ethic.

Love of neighbour

Caring for the physical world “is an important element of loving other people.”¹⁵⁴ Jesus stated that one of the two greatest commandments was to “love your neighbour as yourself” (Mark 12:31) and made clear that this love encompasses the whole person, not just their spiritual needs (Matt 25:35-36). Care for our neighbour is a Christian response to the love of God in sending his Son to die for us. In both the Old and the New Testaments there is an emphasis on considering the good of future generations. We are told to “care for our unborn successors and for the stranger and the foreigner (Leviticus 19:33-34; Jeremiah 22:3; Matthew 25:35-45).”¹⁵⁵ The challenges of climate change and resource depletion highlight the fact that all our

¹⁴⁹ Northcott, *Moral Climate*, 10.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁵¹ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 292.

¹⁵² Wirzba, *Paradise of God*, 38.

¹⁵³ McDonagh, *Greening of the Church*, 127.

¹⁵⁴ Spencer and White, *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living*, 86.

¹⁵⁵ Robert S. White, “Natural disasters and acts of God,” in White, *Creation in Crisis*, 119.

actions and choices have repercussions for other people, often people completely unknown to us and in other parts of the world. This is especially so in an age of international trade when much of what we consume has been grown or manufactured overseas. Trade is important for the development of other countries, but it makes no sense at all, and contributes to increasing CO₂ emissions, when things that could easily be grown or made in this country are shipped halfway around the world.

“When we act locally, we put ourselves in a position to suffer from our decisions. When we act locally, we act freely and with hope in the place we call home. When we act locally, we love our neighbors.”¹⁵⁶ What is now clear is that love of our neighbours – all of humankind, as made clear by Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), not just those whom we instinctively care about – cannot be separated from care for the non-human creation. The world is interdependent; humans cannot survive without the healthy ecosystems that support flora and fauna and provide all that is necessary for the flourishing of life.¹⁵⁷

The work of Christ

Jesus has been related to the whole of God’s creation throughout eternity and the New Testament, rather than replacing the Hebrew Bible’s theology of creation, rereads it “retrospectively in the light of Jesus Christ.”¹⁵⁸ It should come as no surprise, therefore, that many New Testament passages make it clear that it was Jesus, the Son, who was the active agent of creation.¹⁵⁹ For example:

- John 1:3: Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.
- Col 1:16-17: For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible ... all things have been created through him and for him.
- Rev 4:11: You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.

¹⁵⁶ Robert Campbell, “Why I don’t care about Climate Change,” <http://ew.ecocongregation.org/node/1045>, accessed 14 June 2011 (no longer available).

¹⁵⁷ Dave Bookless, *Planetwise: Dare to Care for God’s World* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 147.

¹⁵⁸ Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 142.

¹⁵⁹ Colin A. Russell, *Saving Planet Earth: A Christian Response* (Milton Keynes: Authentic, 2008), 86; Lytton John Musselman, “[Caring for Creation: A Biblical View on Christian Environmental Concern](#),” lecture 17 March 1998, accessed 26 April 2011.

In his teaching, too, Jesus provides guidelines that put care for all of creation – human and non-human – at the centre of the gospel: “the sermon on the mount gives pretty precise instructions on how to construct an outlook that could lead to an economics of survival.”¹⁶⁰ In Jesus, God “is manifest in a new way but not one that will be separate from matter, life, human culture and religion, but will continue grounded in the inter-relatedness of the Earth community. This story of Jesus, like that of the cosmos, will be promise of a new, a different future for the heavens and the earth and for the *anthropos*, male and female.”¹⁶¹

Northcott espouses a Trinitarian theology that sees Christ as the Creator of the world as well as its Redeemer – leading to an understanding of creation as “cruciform”: “Christians have no other foundation for narrating the meaning of God’s creation than the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”¹⁶² In his review of theocentric approaches to ecotheology, Northcott cites Stephen Clark, whose exploration of the doctrine of atonement leads to the suggestion that Christ’s death liberates us from the guilt of our sins against *creation* – animals and trees as well as people.¹⁶³ The cross cleanses us from “guilt and shame at the degradation of the earth,” giving us instead “a new view of a creation restored by atonement which may help us to harm and waste less of the non-human world.”¹⁶⁴ Moltmann also extends the significance of the cross and resurrection of Christ to *all* creation, allowing Christ to become not just humanity’s but creation’s hope for the future. Deane-Drummond sees possible disadvantages in Moltmann’s “broadening soteriology beyond a narrowly human horizon.” She suggests that while “it might encourage us to become more sensitive to nature’s pain, it could ... alienate us from the person of Christ.”¹⁶⁵ Northcott also expresses some concerns about Moltmann’s ecotheology, warning that its pantheism comes close to a biocentric approach.¹⁶⁶ But biblical teaching can

¹⁶⁰ Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful*, 129, quoted by McIntosh, *Rekindling Community*, 47.

¹⁶¹ Elaine Wainwright, “The Book of the Genealogy: How Shall We Read It?”, in Elaine Wainwright, Luiz Carlos Susin and Felix Wilfred (eds), *Eco-Theology* (London: SCM, 2009), 21.

¹⁶² Michael S. Northcott, reviewing Lisa H Sideris, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology and Natural Selection* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2003), *Ecotheology* 10(3) 2005, 405.

¹⁶³ Northcott, *Environment & Christian Ethics*, 141-147.

¹⁶⁴ Stephen R. L. Clark, *How to Think About the Earth: Philosophical and Theological Models for Ecology* (London: Mowbrays, 1993), 143, cited in Northcott, *Environment & Christian Ethics*, 145.

¹⁶⁵ Celia Deane-Drummond, *Ecology in Jürgen Moltmann’s Theology* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 300-301.

¹⁶⁶ Northcott, *Environment & Christian Ethics*, 142.

help all Christians to see “Jesus as Lord of Creation as well as Lord of the individual Christian’s life.”¹⁶⁷

Hope for the future

“The liberation of creation is to happen at the end of history,”¹⁶⁸ when full salvation for earth and for all of creation will be attained in the glory of the resurrection. While we can have this hope for the future this does not in any way absolve us from action in the present. We therefore “ought to care about creation because of its eternal destiny” and because God’s plan to reconcile all things to himself (Col 1:20) “really does include all things.”¹⁶⁹ In Rom 8:19-23 Paul describes creation as frustrated and groaning and part of the reason for this lies in humankind’s failure to fulfil “their God-given mandate to care for it as servant kings.”¹⁷⁰ But, as we have seen above, Christ’s death does more than bring wholeness for humanity, it also restores creation. The wholeness we experience in the present is a firstfruit and part of the guarantee of a new creation set free from decay and from the harm that we have inflicted upon it. We can partner with God as we strive to achieve a balance between God’s sovereignty (he is in ultimate control) and human responsibility (the charge given to us to care for all that God has made).

The view we have of the future of the earth determines how we treat it in the present. Some Christians seem to believe that if this earth is destined for destruction, and we will get a new heaven and a new earth, there is no particular need to care for the planet we are living on. However, the phrase “new heaven and new earth” occurs not only in Rev 21:1 but “in Isaiah 65:17 and Isaiah 66:22, which are part of one main passage about an ideal world in the messianic age.”¹⁷¹ There, the newness of the heavens and the earth comes from their freedom from corruption and wickedness. Seeing the Old and New Testament passages side by side gives an image of the earth redeemed and renewed, but not of “the earth as a temporary and disposable commodity.”¹⁷² The important role played by the natural world in the new creation is also demonstrated by parallel passages in Ezek 47 and Rev 22, describing both life-giving water and the healing properties of leaves (Ezek 47:1-12; Rev 22:1-2).

¹⁶⁷ Musselman, “Caring for Creation.”

¹⁶⁸ Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 99.

¹⁶⁹ Spencer and White, *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living*, 89.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁷¹ Hodson, “Environmental Christianity.”

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

In the sections above, seven principles have been linked with creation care to illustrate the breadth of biblical material that is available to support Christian environmentalism. Willis Jenkins adopts a different approach, taking just one central theme – grace – and proposing that Christian environmental ethics are based on a number of different “strategies” that link to it, each having distinct theological resources.¹⁷³ These strategies are *ecojustice*, which places moral respect for nature within a theological framework, *Christian stewardship* and *ecological spirituality*. He traces the linkages between environmental ethics and Christian theology and in concluding, talks about a number of priests and lay people who have been killed while trying to protect threatened environments. “By risking their lives, these environmental martyrs testify to the way environmental problems threaten the heart of the Christian faith. By giving their lives, they challenge and revitalize our understanding of nature and grace, of life on earth in the context of life with God. ... The blood of these martyrs must be the seeds of a reforesting, resisting, replanting, restoring church.”¹⁷⁴

Monotheism “transformed the human condition, endowing it with meaning and thereby rescuing it from tragedy in the name of hope.” Thus, Jonathan Sacks argues that “if God created the physical universe, then God is free, and if God made us in his image, we are free ... Because we can change ourselves, we can change the world. That is the religious basis of hope.”¹⁷⁵ However, in his discussion of morality Sacks goes on to argue that issues such as climate change and biodiversity loss, alongside world poverty and economic inequality, “are in essence *political* rather than *moral*.” While individuals can make a difference and can put pressure on governments and multinational corporations, such issues, he argues, are not about personal morality, “not about justice, temperance and wisdom, or about faith, hope, charity and love.” While ecology is vital to our future, says Sacks, it is a political rather than a moral issue.¹⁷⁶ This is, however, *not* the witness of many Christians and other people of faith, who see their responses to climate change – both in terms of personal behaviour and campaigning – as driven by a biblically based moral sense, by a desire for justice and by love of neighbour. Sustainable living *is* a moral issue and God calls us to live in accordance with the right order of things.¹⁷⁷ Indeed, Campbell views all

¹⁷³ Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace*, 60.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 243.

¹⁷⁵ Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011), 38.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁷⁷ Spencer and White, *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living*, 103, 106.

environmental action as religious action: “Every action happens within a story, defines a problem, banks its hope on some form of redemption and then establishes a set of actions consistent with that religious belief.” He goes on to affirm a distinctly Christian ecology on the grounds that “it is true to the way things actually are.”¹⁷⁸ The prophets’ injunction to seek justice for the oppressed and the gospel call to care for the poor impact upon personal choices – moral choices. There is clear biblical support for making decisions such as opting for green energy and curtailing air travel and car use.

Tim Gorringer suggests that coming to Transition as a Christian is to be challenged to think afresh about what the transition from the old life to the new – symbolised in baptism – means today.¹⁷⁹ Elsewhere, he says that Christians should engage in the Transition movement, “bringing to it hope in the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead.”¹⁸⁰

Conclusions

The environmental movement began almost fifty years ago and in 1962 Carson quoted E. B. White:

I am pessimistic about the human race because it is too ingenious for its own good. Our approach to nature is to beat it into submission. We would stand a better chance of survival if we accommodated ourselves to this planet and viewed it appreciatively instead of skeptically and dictatorially.¹⁸¹

Today this concern is shared by many Christians as well as by much of the environmental movement.

The challenges of peak oil and climate change and the knowledge that humans “have been destroying the ecological conditions apart from which much of life cannot exist” are part of “the central religious issue confronting humankind today.”¹⁸² While historically the church was part of the problem, at times condoning an exploitative attitude towards creation, there is now an opportunity for the church to engage with measures designed to mitigate the harmful effects of such an attitude. To date,

¹⁷⁸ Campbell, “Why I don’t care about Climate Change.”

¹⁷⁹ Gorringer, “Transition Town movement,” 18.

¹⁸⁰ Tim Gorringer, “Visions of the end? Revelation and climate change,” in Sebastian C. H. Kim and Jonathan Draper, *Christianity and the Renewal of Nature: Creation, climate change and human responsibility* (London: SPCK, 2011), 25.

¹⁸¹ Carson, *Silent Spring*, 7; source of quotation unknown.

¹⁸² Kaufmann, *In the beginning*, 38.

churches in which the national leadership have set an example – as with Rowan Williams, Richard Chartres and John Sentamu in the Church of England – are more engaged with a broadening of church life to include creation care and environmentalism within the day-to-day life of their congregations. In other churches it is committed members of the clergy or congregation – often alone or in very small groups – who are trying to bring to the wider church the message that issues such as climate change and resource depletion really are central Christian themes.

A duty of loving care towards the planet and all its inhabitants needs to become a central feature of the Christian message in today's church, accompanied by scriptural backing and practical guidance encouraging God's people to be at the forefront of change. As Hodson observes: "Humanity has been given leadership over creation (Genesis 1:28). This is the first command from God to humankind and it has been demonstrably ignored. At this time of crisis, it should be a foundational mission call for all who take God's commands seriously."¹⁸³

Hessel refers to an "ecological reformation of Christianity," which "positively intersects, rather than competes with, struggles for economic, racial, and gender justice." He acknowledges that many Christians, both "laity and clergy ... are keeping the faith through spiritual attunement to natural as well as social ecology," trying "to embody an 'eco-justice' orientation that grapples with environmental devastation and socioeconomic injustice, affirming the indivisibility of environmental and human rights, and demanding action for the common good." Nevertheless, "Christians still do not see mission in terms of suffering with, healing, and liberating creation." They "have yet to 'get it' with regard to an 'ecological reformation of Christianity,' that focuses on the new context of imperiled earth community and responds by reorienting liturgy, theology, ethics, and mission." "The church ecologically reformed ... the laity actively engaged with others of like mind in every social sector for justice, peace, and integrity of creation."¹⁸⁴

Examples of such engagement can be found, and in the UK many of them are happening as part of the programmes described above. In these initiatives the church is demonstrating environmental care and showing that it is not territorial about its own

¹⁸³ Margot R. Hodson, "Storm Clouds and Mission: Creation Care and Environmental Crisis," in Brian Woolnough and Wonsuk Ma, eds, *Holistic Mission: God's Plan for God's People* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 215.

¹⁸⁴ Dieter Hessel, "The Church Ecologically Reformed," in Hessel and Rasmussen, *Earth Habitat*, 185-187, 199.

space and is willing to share and co-operate with others who have overlapping concerns. In Hertford, for example, a “Churches in Transition” initiative has Transition Hertford (TH) working alongside the Methodist Church Oasis Café; once a month TH has a “Transition Corner” to advertise their existence, give information, sell books and talk to any visitors who show interest.

However, the Transition movement does risk duplicating some of the church’s historical errors. Its outlook is also largely anthropocentric and local, driven by concerns about adjusting to a more sustainable way of living and about the sort of world our children and grandchildren will inherit. But when its community-building and hope-filled message is supplemented by an affirmation of the intrinsic value of *all* God’s creation and justice-seeking that the church can add, there is a rich fund of material and resources available. The church in the UK has not yet fully taken advantage of this and there is a real need for eco-theology to have a prominent place in the training of clergy and other church workers. Hessel puts it as follows:

There is urgent need for fresh theological-ethical reflection on the life and mission of the church as iconic participant in the new creation – the body of Christ working in human and natural communities to fulfill God’s will. At stake is not just the church’s practice (what it does) but also its nature (the church’s being) as a believing community.¹⁸⁵

The “Earth Charter,” issued in 2000, is recommended as an ethical framework for all who seek to engage with environmental issues.¹⁸⁶ Its full text is reproduced both in Hessel and Rasmussen’s *Earth Habitat* – specifically about the church’s response to “eco-injustice” – and also in the online version of *Transition in Action*, which identifies the practical steps that the Devon town of Totnes could take to reduce its dependency on fossil fuels by 2030.¹⁸⁷

The vision of religious environmentalists – bearing a striking resemblance to that of the Transition Network – is described by Gottlieb as follows:

... they offer a comprehensive vision in which care for the earth and care for people go hand in hand. This vision is not simply about

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁸⁶ <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/pages/Read-the-Charter.html>, accessed 6 April 2011; “The mission of the Earth Charter Initiative is to promote the transition to sustainable ways of living and a global society founded on a shared ethical framework that includes respect and care for the community of life, ecological integrity, universal human rights, respect for diversity, economic justice, democracy, and a culture of peace.” <https://earthcharter.org/>.

¹⁸⁷ <http://totnesedap.org.uk/book/appendices/appendix-e/>, accessed 22 March 2011 <https://www.transitiontowtotnes.org/groups/building-and-housing/energy-descent-action-plan/>.

what is wrong but about what can be right, not just about “living with less” but about living an authentic and ultimately much more satisfying form of life. This positive dimension is particularly important for environmental politics, for if we have learned anything, it is that threatening people with doom and scolding them for waste and pollution are not terribly effective ways to rally the masses to the cause.¹⁸⁸

For this vision to take hold, people need to understand that all nature has an intrinsic moral significance and that all of creation is in receipt of God’s grace – eliminating the nature-grace dichotomy whereby the Christian church has tended to restrict grace to the area of personal salvation and the means of grace to Scripture and sacraments. The whole of nature can be seen as an expression of grace.¹⁸⁹ Similarly, we need to acknowledge that the church has something to say on everything that affects humanity and the planet – because God is fundamentally interested in *all of life*. But “the vast majority of Christians have not been equipped for mission in their daily contexts, nor are they being helped to live out the abundant life in Christ where they spend most of their time.”¹⁹⁰ Christians need to be adequately equipped to bring a message of creation care to their communities, and those in positions of church leadership need training and resources in faith-based environmentalism. There have been calls for more environmental theology “in the curricula of theological education and more eco-practice” in the life of theological institutions.¹⁹¹ A 2006 conference, resulting in a document intended to address this, included workshops on the integration of environmental thinking into the following curriculum areas: Doctrine and Bible; Ethics; Mission; and Worship.¹⁹² However, despite the huge shift in thinking over the last decade, eco-theology is rarely integrated into the core thinking of theological institutions.¹⁹³ Bodies already involved in this area – such as the John Ray Initiative (JRI),¹⁹⁴ the Arthur Rank Centre¹⁹⁵ or A Rocha¹⁹⁶ – are well placed to assist in providing such courses. In the UK, speakers from these organisations provide

¹⁸⁸ Gottlieb, *Greener Faith*, 13.

¹⁸⁹ Nash, *Loving Nature*, 95.

¹⁹⁰ Mark Greene, *The Great Divide* (London: LICC, 2010), 5.

¹⁹¹ John Weaver and Margot R. Hodson, eds, *The Place of Environmental Theology: A Guide for Seminaries, Colleges and Universities* (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 2007).

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ Margot Hodson, 27 June 2011, personal communication.

¹⁹⁴ <http://www.jri.org.uk/>, accessed 5 May 2011.

¹⁹⁵ <https://arthurrankcentre.org.uk/>, accessed 5 May 2011. See also John Whitehead and Martin Hodson, “Christian Rural Concern: Ahead of the Game,” *The Reader*, 108(2), 2011, p.20.

¹⁹⁶ <http://www.arocha.org/gb-en/index.html>, accessed 21 February 2011 (no longer available, see <https://arocha.org.uk/>).

some of the lectures where environmental theology is included within courses at theological colleges.¹⁹⁷ However, this is often within optional modules; Martin Hodson concludes that it is “only when environment becomes integrated across the whole syllabus, and into college life, that Christians will come out of the colleges with a full appreciation of the issues involved.”¹⁹⁸

Christians know that it is not only what they say but what they do that has the potential to speak to people about the love of God in Christ (Jas 2:14, 17). Demonstrating hospitality, love for neighbours and care for the poor are part of the gospel message but the *green* gospel for today must *also* demonstrate our love and care for *all* creation. In words that find echoes within the Transition movement, theologian Michael Northcott put it thus: “People will need to recover a sense of the spiritual significance of treasuring and guarding their own local ecosystems. Food, fibre and fuel will need to be grown and utilised locally and in ways which respect the regenerative cycles of life on earth.”¹⁹⁹

Living more simply, re-using and recycling, reducing our consumption of fossil fuels and becoming more thoughtful and cautious consumers may not feel like Christian discipleship but should nevertheless be an integral part of a twenty-first-century Christian life. True contentment has never been “dependent on the quantity of material possessions” (Phil 4:12-13; Heb 13:5); enrichment can be found in “helping others, contributing to the welfare of neighbours and the wider community” and “giving time and talents to those in need.”²⁰⁰ In a society where any or all of these can be seen as counter-cultural, explaining such actions provides opportunities for Christian witness. The challenges of climate change and peak oil are daunting but we do not have to act on our own. God “will come alongside us to help us as we seek to do his work here on earth.”²⁰¹

The Transition movement is a radical, imaginative and community-led response to the issues of peak oil and climate change. As Christians, this offers us a wonderful opportunity to act out our God-given responsibility as creation carers.²⁰²

¹⁹⁷ Weaver and Hodson, *Place of Environmental Theology*, 83.

¹⁹⁸ Martin J. Hodson, “Environmental Theology Courses in Europe – Where are we now?”, in Weaver and Hodson, *Place of Environmental Theology*, 85.

¹⁹⁹ Northcott, *Moral Climate*, 15.

²⁰⁰ John Lane, *Timeless Simplicity: Creative living in a consumer society* (Foxhole: Green Books, 2001; repr., 2009), 69, 101.

²⁰¹ John Houghton, “The Challenge of Sustainability,” in R. J. Berry, ed., *When Enough is Enough: A Christian Framework for Environmental Sustainability* (Nottingham: IVP, 2007), 68.

²⁰² George Dow, “Churches in Transition: a new campaign,” *Green Christian* 68 (2009), 4.

Our future is dependent on collaboration with the rest of God's creation.²⁰³

²⁰³ Margot Hodson, "Advent and Ecology: Isaiah's vision of a sustainable future," sermon preached in St Salvator's Chapel, St Andrews, 7 December 2008, <http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/about/UniversityChapels/Preachers/Preachers2008-2009/MargotHodson/>, accessed 17 June 2011 (no longer available).

**GREEN GOSPEL: CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO THE CHALLENGES OF
PEAK OIL AND CLIMATE CHANGE – ALMOST A DECADE ON**

Introduction

A decade is a very short time indeed in the history of the planet, but in the unfolding story of humanity’s response to energy needs and climate change the years since writing my dissertation on “Christian responses” have proved to be very significant indeed and the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century now feels like a very long time ago.

In 2011 I concluded that the “duty of loving care towards the planet and all its inhabitants needs to become a central feature of the Christian message ... accompanied by scriptural backing and practical guidance encouraging God’s people to be at the forefront of change,” and there are some signs that this has started to happen. Faith-based NGOs are giving greater prominence to climate change as the most significant issue in relation to the alleviation of poverty and achieving social justice²⁰⁴ and, together with Christian climate-change organisations, they are seeking to broaden the gospel understanding and mission vision of congregations that have traditionally shied away from involvement in political issues.²⁰⁵

On the world stage, climate change has achieved much greater prominence both across the media and within the public consciousness. At the time of writing, in early 2020, vast tracts of southern and eastern Australia had been in flames for weeks after severe drought was followed by the worst wildfire season in many decades. Many millions of animals have died, thousands of homes and businesses have been destroyed and a number of people have lost their lives in a tragedy that has received worldwide media coverage. The Australian heatwave and fires follow on from extremes of weather all around the globe: in the USA – which recorded fourteen separate billion-dollar disasters last year²⁰⁶ – and in Thailand, Africa, Iran, Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh and Bhutan, and there were deaths associated with many of these disasters. As a result, one journalist even suggested that 2019 might come to be

²⁰⁴ See, for example, “Song of the prophets: a global theology of climate change,” Christian Aid, November 2014; https://www.tearfund.org/about_us/what_we_do_and_where/issues/climate_change/ accessed January 2020; <https://www.worldvision.ca/our-work/climate-change> accessed January 2020.

²⁰⁵ Christian Aid, “The Time is Now” campaign, 2019; *Tenants of the King*, Operation Noah, 2018; Christian Climate Action, <https://christianclimateaction.org/>.

²⁰⁶ <https://www.climate.gov/news-features/blogs/beyond-data/2010-2019-landmark-decade-us-billion-dollar-weather-and-climate> accessed January 2020.

regarded as “Year Zero of the climate apocalypse.”²⁰⁷ There is also mounting concern about the loss of ice in the Arctic and the Antarctic, and how this may both cause sea levels to rise and exacerbate extreme weather around the globe, as average global temperatures inch slowly upwards.²⁰⁸

In the past decade the terminology has also evolved: from the sometimes confusing “global warming” – which failed to acknowledge that in some areas it would not be desertification, heatwaves or drought but increased rainfall and harsher winters that might well be the result of climate change – to “climate crisis” or “climate emergency,” as the timescales have narrowed in which changes can be made in order to reduce the probable impacts of increased levels of atmospheric greenhouse gases leading to higher global average temperatures.

While temperature records have continued to be broken year by year and extreme weather events have become more frequent, there has also been a growing recognition that faith communities – and the Christian Church as the largest of these – have an important part to play in raising awareness and encouraging action. This was particularly in evidence in the run-up to the 2015 COP²⁰⁹ meeting in Paris, when Christians from many countries journeyed to Paris in a “pilgrimage of justice and peace, for people and for earth.”²¹⁰ When the French government, in the wake of earlier unconnected terror attacks, banned all public demonstrations linked to the COP21 meeting, around ten thousand pairs of shoes were left symbolically in the Place de la Republique and many of these were left by pilgrims from faith communities. As a visual aid this was a powerful message and reminiscent of the “sign acts” of Jeremiah and Ezekiel.²¹¹ Many of the climate pilgrims who became engaged with action in 2015 have continued to lobby for progress on tackling carbon emissions, calling – among other things – for Churches to divest funds from fossil fuel companies.²¹² The next crucial COP meeting (which was due to take place in Glasgow, Scotland in November 2020) will be a focus for prayer and action by environmentally aware Christians from around the world. In the UK, membership of

²⁰⁷ Geoff Goldrick, *Guardian*, 20 December 2019, accessed January 2020.

²⁰⁸ <https://www.climate.gov/news-features/features/antarctica-colder-arctic-it%E2%80%99s-still-losing-ice> accessed January 2020.

²⁰⁹ The Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

²¹⁰ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/pilgrims-for-climate-justice-plan-to-impact-cop-21-in-paris> accessed January 2020.

²¹¹ “Sign acts are nonverbal actions and objects intentionally employed by the prophets so that message content was communicated through them to the audience.” (Kelvin G. Friebe, *Jeremiah’s and Ezekiel’s Sign Acts*, Bloomsbury, 1999).

²¹² See, for example, <https://brightnow.org.uk/>.

the activist group Christian Climate Action grew from around 40 to more than 900 during 2019, demonstrating a very great increase in the awareness and engagement of Christians in response to climate change.

In the worldwide Church, one of the most significant developments was the publication, in 2015, of a papal encyclical letter by Pope Francis entitled *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*.²¹³ My further reflections on the years since 'Green Gospel' was submitted will therefore concentrate primarily on selected aspects of this important and wide-ranging document.

Laudato Si'

With an estimated global Catholic population of 1.3 billion this document, which automatically became part of the body of the Catholic Church's social teaching, immediately had a wide audience which has extended outwards as the scope and importance of the Pope's letter has been appreciated across other denominations and within inter-faith networks. In a recent book the encyclical letter is described as "the most eloquent attempt to articulate a moral vision of the issue [climate change]."²¹⁴

Pope Francis appealed (para 14, *Laudato Si'*) for "a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet" and for enhanced education concerning the "covenant between humanity and the environment" (paras 209-215). A *Laudato Si'* Institute was established as early as 2016 in Granada, Spain, with two specific goals: "a) the study of and education in the care of creation in light of the Encyclical *Laudato Si'* and the tradition of Christian social doctrine; and b) the promotion of active initiatives for the application of the encyclical, and especially for the promotion of community development and entrepreneurship, particularly in rural areas, from Christian communities."²¹⁵ (Care for creation is one of the seven principles of Catholic social teaching and Christian social doctrine is a specific elaboration of the teaching, developed in response to a growing understanding of a situation. So the doctrine may change while the teaching itself does not.²¹⁶)

The Pope also called for dialogue "among the various sciences" (para 201) and between politics and economics "in the service of life" (para 189). Among the initiatives responding to this appeal is a further new organisation. In October 2019 the

²¹³ Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, Catholic Truth Society, 2015.

²¹⁴ Nathaniel Rich, *Losing Earth: The Decade We Could Have Stopped Climate Change*, Picador, 2019.

²¹⁵ <http://www.laudatosiinstitute.org/en/about-the-institute/> accessed January 2020.

²¹⁶ Cf. one of the Five Marks of Mission of the Anglican Communion: "To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth."

University of Oxford in the UK launched a new research institute designed specifically “to implement Pope Francis’s vision ... to respond to ‘the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor’.” The *Laudato Si’* Research Institute (LSRI) aims to “generate societal transformation through coordinated engagement with key Church and global players involved in policy and governance.” Under its Director, Professor Celia Deane-Drummond, the LSRI will bring together theologians with others in a forum committed to rigorous multidisciplinary research.

In a section of *Laudato Si’* looking at “civic and political love,” Pope Francis urged his readers to “regain the conviction that we need one another” (para 229). He goes on to outline how love for one another can be expressed in the civic and political spheres, through “love for society and commitment to the common good” and he suggests that it is this “social love” that is the impetus behind the development of strategies to halt environmental degradation. In recent years there have been two movements that I would suggest exemplify this “social love,” although neither overtly acknowledge any specific Christian, or indeed religious, influence. First, the rise of an initially UK-based movement, Extinction Rebellion (XR), which is now “a global environmental movement with the stated aim of using nonviolent civil disobedience to compel government action to avoid tipping points in the climate system, biodiversity loss, and the risk of social and ecological collapse” has resulted in more than 1250 local governments, and the parliaments or governments of twenty-five countries, declaring a “climate emergency.” The convening of citizens’ assemblies to help formulate responses to the climate crisis is among the key demands of XR and the national Climate Assembly UK was convened in January 2020; it will meet over three months and its recommendations will be debated in the House of Commons.²¹⁷ Second, in 2019, Greta Thunberg became a worldwide leader of young people, who are quite justifiably calling on their parents’ generation – and particularly those in positions of political and corporate power – to act urgently to address the climate crisis. Then aged only fifteen, in August 2018 she began a “School strike for the climate” outside the Swedish parliament and the resulting school strike movement has since spread around the world. She has addressed the United Nations, met the Pope and a number of world leaders, and convinced many people to review their lifestyle choices with the aim of reducing their carbon footprints. Both of these mass

²¹⁷ <https://www.climateassembly.uk/about/>, accessed January 2020.

movements – much larger than anything in existence just a decade ago – have attracted support from many Christians, who find in these forms of activism a practical way in which to demonstrate that while the science and the forecasting paint a gloomy picture, there is nevertheless hope.

Another positive aspect of these movements has been to create new communities of care and concern in which people make new social connections and find mutual support and encouragement in the face of the fear and depression that can accompany a growing awareness of the issues surrounding climate change. In this regard they have been aided by the rapid increase in digital connectivity, allowing even people who are unable to get out to meetings or engage in activism to have a sense of being part of something that they know to be important. Although cautioning against the breakdown of society that can be exacerbated by the isolation that these same media can encourage for some people (para 47), Pope Francis does acknowledge the exciting possibilities that they offer. In many communities, these new groupings – local XR groups or Green Groups, for example – have found natural allies in the Transition Town groups that I discussed in my dissertation, committed as the latter are to fostering resilience at both the community and the individual level. Peak oil, however, is no longer a primary concern of the movement and their focus is much more about “communities stepping up to address the big challenges they face” and the “urgent need to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, greatly reduce our reliance on fossil fuels and make wise use of precious resources.”²¹⁸

Pope Francis discusses the “globalization of the technocratic paradigm” (paras 106-114) and is critical of the fact that modern economies adopt technological advances primarily with profit in mind and without reference to negative effects on humankind (para 109). Similarly, he points out that “when technology disregards the great ethical principles, it ends up considering any practice whatsoever as licit ... a technology severed from ethics will not easily be able to limit its power” (para 136). For many who are seeking to address climate change, it is the fossil fuel industries that exemplify these characteristics and there is mounting evidence that some of them were fully aware of the dangers posed by increasing emissions of greenhouse gases, and that the burning of fossil fuels was a major contributor. Not only so, but in some cases they initiated programmes of “misinformation, propaganda and political

²¹⁸ <https://transitionnetwork.org/about-the-movement/what-is-transition/> accessed January 2020.

influence” in order to thwart measures aimed at tackling the problem.²¹⁹ Over the last decade it has been acknowledged that if runaway climate change is to be avoided then 80% or more of known fossil fuel reserves must remain in the ground and no new reserves should be exploited. The business models of those companies who continue exploration for oil or gas are therefore not compatible with care for the earth and Christians have been among those calling for institutions to withdraw their investments from fossil fuel companies and invest instead in clean energy technologies. There have been significant advances in this “divestment movement” since it began in 2012, and just over a year ago the total sum moved out of the sector was estimated as almost \$8 trillion (£6.3 trillion). It is faith organisations that have “led the charge” on divestment²²⁰ and this is one of the most significant Christian responses to climate change of the last decade.

Alongside these hopeful signs that Pope Francis’s message has been heard and is encouraging the “ecological conversion” that he called for – and the other indicators that Christians are making a significant difference in responding to the threats posed by the climate crisis – it is worth sounding a note of caution. At a recent seminar,²²¹ a delegate asked why we should expect that *Laudato Si’* will be truly effective when it comes to achieving ecological conversion when the encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, from 130 years ago, “failed so miserably” on social conversion. However, it is made very clear in *Laudato Si’* that the links between ecological conversion and social conversion are strong (para 48), with those who are already the poorest and most vulnerable being most at risk from the deleterious effects of climate change. As a result, changes made now in tackling the climate crisis also have the potential to benefit those who are still disadvantaged by poverty or lack of resources. One example would be the huge expansion in the use of solar power, which can now provide low-cost energy to communities in areas where sunshine is plentiful but who have never previously had access to electricity generated from fossil fuels. At the seminar mentioned above, however, it was also pointed out that when the impacts of climate change begin to adversely affect the wealthy and powerful the process of ecological conversion can be expected to accelerate.

²¹⁹ Nathaniel Rich, *Losing Earth: The Decade We Could Have Stopped Climate Change*, Picador, 2019.

²²⁰ <https://www.independent.co.uk/environment/fossil-fuels-divest-climate-change-global-warming-emissions-campaign-a8681931.html>, accessed January 2020.

²²¹ “Human Dignity and Mother Earth,” 21 January 2020, Blackfriars Hall, Oxford.

In conclusion

There are a number of reasons why Christians have been relatively slow to respond to the climate crisis, and these were elaborated in my dissertation. In reflecting on the ways in which the Christian response has developed over the past decade I have referenced a Catholic perspective in order to demonstrate that where Christians have engaged with the issues around climate change their actions have had many characteristics that are in line with papal guidance on care for the earth. However, to the extent that some Christians are still proving reluctant to provide leadership and guidance on creation care, the reasons for this have recently been extremely well summarised in a blog post by Dr Ruth Valerio.²²² Whatever our Christian heritage in terms of denomination, local culture or worship style, we are disciples of the same Creator God and share the same earthly home.

That global problems can result in concerted action by governments, corporations and individuals has been dramatically demonstrated during 2020 in response to the pandemic caused by a novel coronavirus, Covid-19. In the space of a few short weeks travel, both international and local, was severely curtailed as “lockdown” restrictions were imposed first in countries in Asia and then in Europe and America. Industries were rapidly able to convert production lines in order to aid in the manufacture of additional protective equipment for medical staff, homeless people were found shelter and messages about avoiding food waste and ensuring supplies for the most in need were broadcast. World leaders acknowledged the importance of collaboration in tackling what was very quickly acknowledged to be a global problem and the public made clear their support for those whose work involved self-sacrifice and risk while openly criticising either politicians or businesses that appeared to be trying to take advantage of this quite unprecedented situation for their own gain.

Meanwhile, it has been noted that pollution levels around the world fell sharply, with a resulting fall in both morbidity and mortality associated with poor air quality. Emissions of greenhouse gases will almost certainly have decreased as well during the first months of 2020, but there is no way of telling yet whether there will be lasting changes such that these and other improvements are maintained in the

²²² <https://ruthvalerio.net/environment/why-have-christians-not-responded-sooner-to-the-climate-crisis/>, accessed January 2020. Dr Valerio has many years of experience of Christian engagement with the issue through her work with A Rocha and Tearfund, and has written extensively on justice, environment and lifestyle issues, particularly from a Christian perspective.

longer term. The economic impacts of the pandemic will be severe but amid the calls for financial aid to help businesses to return to normal in due course there are many who recognise that, to quote Peter C Baker, "... disasters and emergencies do not just throw light on the world as it is. They also rip open the fabric of normality. Through the hole that opens up, we glimpse possibilities of other worlds."²²³ It was the "normal" pattern of activity that resulted in the worldwide spread of a new and deadly disease, a disease that originated in animals and possibly crossed into humans because of the increasing pressure that we are putting on the non-human creatures with whom we were created to share the planet, and a disease that spread rapidly because of the modern speed of travel around the globe.

The COP26 meeting has now been postponed from November 2020 until next year, but Christian campaigners on the climate crisis, alongside others, are working hard to seek a way forward that might allow the coronavirus pandemic to be seen as a wake-up call to the world to stop exceeding the planet's limits. Deforestation, biodiversity loss and climate change all make pandemics more likely but as the value of scientific expertise has now been recognised by politicians, perhaps science can be used to design economies that will mitigate the threats of climate change, biodiversity loss and pandemics. It is my earnest hope that together the worldwide Church will, as recommended in *Laudato Si*, increasingly work alongside other faith communities, science and technology, business and politics, to seek solutions and new ways of moving towards a sustainable future for all life on earth.

²²³ *Guardian* online, "'We can't go back to normal': how will coronavirus change the world?," 31 March 2020.

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