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# Editorial

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## Ecological Emergency

EDWARD CARDALE

How do you address a subject as large as ecological ethics in the pages of a small journal? How do you go about 'saving the planet', that much abused phrase, when the agenda is so immense?

For this issue I have cast caution aside. We have not tried to propose a new agenda: but we have reflected hard. Our articles reveal, as always I trust, backgrounds of real expertise and experience. A journal of Christian Social Ethics does have a specific perspective and task. But we speak this time with a particular strength of heart and mind on this universal challenge for every human being now on earth.

David Atkinson has been a respected teacher, writer and bishop for many years, and I particularly thank him for help and advice at an early stage of planning for this issue. He continues to speak with both clarity and passion.

Rebecca Watson and Meric Srokosz collaborated on their book *Blue Planet, Blue God*, which we reviewed in January this year. Rebecca is a biblical scholar, and Meric is an oceanographer, which has given a fascinating blend to their work on the Bible and the Sea. Their new article here turns our thoughts towards biblical Chaos as a reference and means of response to our current crisis.

Dave Bookless presents the tragic loss of so many species across the world, reminding us that this loss is as grave as any of the other dimensions of impending ecological collapse. His firm convictions steer us away from despair, while calling for lament and repentance from the Christian community as well as fresh commitment.

Paul Bodenham, as an activist and leader in the Green Christian movement, is honest about failure and misplaced hope. Still, he draws from the many examples in Christian history of those who do the right thing against oppression, with no hope of success, and simply because they must be faithful to the good.

Instead of a different Forum topic, I have added my own voice in a further article: 'What hope is there?' I have taught this subject to a wide range of ministerial students. Some years ago, one of them

declared ‘Nobody knows if any of this stuff is true or not’, and walked out of the class. Another told me that she learned it in geography at school in the 1990’s, so why had it been ignored ever since? In my article I have tried to draw out themes already posed by the others, while insisting that we take apocalyptic categories seriously.

I have not put a question mark after the title Ecological Emergency. A *theological* question is about the respective weight we give to God’s grace and human action. It is also about the essence of human nature, and whether we have the ethical ability to conserve the earth on which we all live. In this issue, we do seem to keep returning to the reality of human failure and frailty. This in turn raises the overall question of evil, in the context of such a threatening future for the planet.

If anything you read here stirs you to disagree, or to reaction of any sort, please let us know. The subject calls at the very least for us to keep the conversation going. We shall be pleased to hear from you.

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# — Christian Ethics and — Climate Change

DAVID ATKINSON

*This article is based on a lecture given in August 2018 at Christ Church Oxford, in a series of summer lectures 'Christian Ethics: today's issues'.*

The magnificent opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics showed England's green and pleasant land transformed by the smoking chimneys of the industrial revolution. There is so much to thank God for in all the benefits science and technology have given us. But one of the things the early industrialists did not know is that by burning fossil fuels, by cutting down rain forests, by some aspects of industrial agriculture, we are putting a blanket around the earth which is changing the climate. My grandfather did not know this, nor did my mother and father. But we do. This places a new and very particular responsibility on our generation.

## **Science sketch**

All through the time of human civilization, the earth has had a relatively stable climate. To go back further, for several hundred thousand years, the average earth surface temperature has gone up and down, through the ice ages and the warm periods in between, partly because of the earth's axis in relation to the sun, partly because of volcanic activity, and so on. The amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has gone up and down as well. The highest concentration CO<sub>2</sub> reached in 600,000 years was 280 parts per million. However, since the industrial revolution, and especially during our lifetime, that concentration has gone up and up. In 2013 it reached 400 parts per million for the first time, and in 2018 was 411 ppm, and is still going up. Carbon dioxide stays in the atmosphere for many decades. If we keep putting greenhouse gases into the atmosphere at this rate, the average surface temperature of the earth will very likely go up by 2 or 4 or even 6 degrees Centigrade in the coming decades. This may not sound much, but when you think that

the temperature difference between an ice age and a warm period is only about 6 to 7 degrees, we are talking about roughly half an ice age change in a matter of decades. The earth has never had to adapt so quickly before. That will create a very unstable climate especially for our grandchildren. The people most affected will not be in the UK or the USA, but in Sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia – people who have done the least to cause the damage, and are the least equipped to adapt.

### **Climate disruption is already happening**

In August 2018, an international group of scientists published a paper which indicated that on present course the planet is at risk of heading towards a ‘Hothouse Earth’ – with a possible rise of global average temperature at 4 – 5 degrees Centigrade higher than pre-industrial levels. That would mean a sea level tens of meters higher than today, and parts of the planet would be uninhabitable. The reason, they argue, is that warming of above 2 degrees may trigger other events in the Earth system which create a sort of domino effect – release of methane from the ocean floor and from permafrost, die-back of rain forests, reduction of snow cover and sea ice, and so on. Their conclusion is that reducing carbon emissions, absolutely crucial though that is, will not be enough.

For the last 30 years, climate scientists have been warning about the likelihood of more frequent severe weather events. The sea levels are rising, as people in the Solomon Islands and the Maldives know. The oceans are getting more acidic (through CO<sub>2</sub> dissolving in the water), which affects coral reefs and plankton, and that affects fish, and that affects the food chain. Some deserts are growing; food and fresh water are scarcer in some areas. Many creatures are becoming extinct at an unprecedented rate.

In a speech to the UN as long ago as 1989, Margaret Thatcher said: “What we are now doing to the world, by degrading the land surfaces, by polluting the waters and by adding greenhouse gases to the air at an unprecedented rate – all this is new in the experience of the earth”.

There is a small but growing number of academics who discuss all this in terms of an almost inevitable near-term social collapse, a probable ecological catastrophe, and a possible extinction of all animal life including human by the end of this century. Whether they are right or not, what sort of world will my young grandchildren find when they are my age?

All this poses a number of ethical questions for us. For example:

- What should be our human relationship to the rest of the planet, to other creatures, to the loss of biodiversity?
- What sort of trust should we place in technology? If technology has caused our problems, is it technology that can provide solutions?
- What are our responsibilities to the parts of the world that are poorest and have done least to cause atmospheric damage?
- How do future generations speak to us of their needs? (It is *our* carbon emissions that will still be around in *their* world.)
- How do we handle the need for global cooperation, as well as the human sin, selfishness and stupidity that hampers it?
- And behind all this: How do we handle our fears and vulnerabilities and anxieties about the future? How do we live and act and pray in the context of possible, even probable, future catastrophe?

These are all moral and I suggest spiritual questions. They are about global justice, about inter-generational justice, about living in the truth. In a speech at the Vatican 10 years ago, David Miliband, then Environment Secretary, said: “Climate is not just an environmental or economic issue; it is a moral and ethical one.”

In 2015 Pope Francis produced his magnificent Encyclical *Laudato Si'*, calling on humanity to awaken our conscience and to take urgent action. The Pope writes on behalf of the Earth, ‘our common home’. We need, he says, to integrate the question of justice so as to hear together ‘both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor’.

### **How have we got to this point?**

I think we have lost the biblical sense that there is a wonderful triangle of relationships between God, humanity and the earth<sup>1</sup> – that we humans are part of the earth, and dependent on the earth for our well-being, but we also have responsibility as God’s image-bearers to care for God’s creation on God’s behalf. Instead of this rich triangle of relationships, there have been strong tendencies to ignore either ‘God’ or ‘the earth’. Many people, especially from the Enlightenment onwards, tend to displace God, and think only of our human relationship to the earth. We think of ourselves as the Masters and Possessors of Nature (as Francis Bacon once put it), using the world to provide for all our wants, so we exploit it, and extract from it, and

damage it without thought of the future. Or we may think that Nature is some great power which we cannot control, nothing we do can make any difference, so 'let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die' – a sort of fatalism. John Donne captured something of the sense of loss that the new science of his day was producing: "Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone."

On the other hand, too many Christian people seem to have concentrated entirely on the 'God – human axis' of the triangle, and simply – and damagingly – ignored our human interdependence with the earth. One Christian moral imperative is to recover that triangle: God, humanity and the earth. God's earth is resilient, but we are called by God to exercise responsibility for it, and the decisions we make have a great effect on it for good or bad.

### Contradictions

The point we have got to now is full of contradictions. Many climate scientists use 'apocalyptic' language about dangerous global warming, yet climate change seems such a low political priority, not least in Trump's White House and despite recent encouraging noises from China and even India.

Burning coal is such a threat to life, and reduction in fossil fuel dependency so urgent, yet we are planning *globally* to build another 2000 coal fired power stations over the next few years.

The G20 agreed in 1999 to end fossil fuels subsidies, and nothing has yet happened.

In 2015, the Paris Climate Accord was the first time 194 countries came to a common mind in seeking to reduce global carbon emissions such that the rise in global earth surface temperature is held at 2 degrees or ideally 1.5. This was an excellent first step, but President Trump has already shown that he is not going to play ball. Going above 1.5 degrees may already be inevitable.

Michael Northcott<sup>2</sup> discusses these contradictions in terms of the 'pulling apart' which happened at the Enlightenment. In the New Testament, the word used for pulling apart, dividing, separating, setting at variance, is '*diabolos*'. The ministry of Jesus in the Gospels, on the other hand, is predominantly healing, gathering up fragments, restoring, and putting back together.

Part of our Christian moral imperative must include a repair of the breach between body and spirit, nature and culture, science and

ethics. This needs collaboration between those engaged in the mission agenda, and the ecological and the developmental agendas, as part of the Mission of God to make all things new. In other words, Economy, Ecology and Equity all belong systemically together.

## **A theological model: Covenant**

One theological model of interrelationships which illuminates much of all this, is that of covenant. We often think of covenant as between God and people: God, Israel and their land. But that is also a symbol of a deeper cosmic covenant: what I called the triangle of relationships between *God, humanity and the earth*. I select four big covenant words: *Creation, Sabbath, Justice, Hope*

### **(i) Covenant and Creation**

A text from John's Gospel:

(a) *In the beginning was the Word; all things were made through him.*

This immediately resonates with Genesis 1, the whole of creation leading to Sabbath worship of the Sabbath, and humanity charged with the responsibility of care for creation. Nature is God's creation: 'the earth is the Lord's' (Psalm 24.1). All we have, life and the means of life, come to us as gift. If as the prophet Amos says of God the creator, he is "Lord of all", then our first ethical response needs to be one of allegiance. An ethic of allegiance to God acknowledges the interdependence between humanity and the earth, and both as dependent on God.

However, John's Gospel continues with this somber note:

(b) *The world was made through him, yet the world knew him not.*

It is possible to be alive in God's creation but not alive to God. As long ago as C8th BC, the prophet Isaiah wrote:

'The earth dries up and withers; the world languishes; the earth lies polluted under its inhabitants. For they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant'.  
(Isa. 24. 4f.)

Isaiah understands the judgement of God against Israel's waywardness as symbolized by environmental degradation. There is a strong biblical theme of creation in jeopardy. It is worth noticing how many of the stories we tell each other, about nature and climate change, illustrate the eclipse of God from the world, and the consequent separation of

humanity from God's earth.

From Francis Bacon onwards, there is a story of *management and control*: this views nature as a mechanism that we can manipulate and exploit for our own benefit. In broad précis, this seems to be Nigel Lawson's theme:<sup>3</sup> 'The earth is very resilient; technological discovery has always come to our rescue in the past; we can manage the world for our benefit; there is no need to worry.' How do we respond to such complacency?

At the opposite extreme, there is a story of *doom*. In his book 'Ten Billion', Stephen Emmott's verdict is "I think we're fxxxxd". How do we respond to overwhelming despair?

There is a third story that seems to prioritize *greed*. We are a 'market-led' economy in which something called "The Market" rules; finance trumps every other consideration; everything, including the environment, becomes a commodity to be desired, or given a price tag. Boris Johnson's Margaret Thatcher Lecture (2013), celebrated greed, along with self-interest and competitiveness, as important drivers for economic growth.

The Christian Gospel gives us a different story:

- instead of management and control: a story of interdependence, cooperation and fellowship;
- instead of despair: a story of compassionate love and mercy leading to hope;
- instead of greed and competitiveness: a story of generosity, self-giving restraint and service.

All in all, the Christian Gospel is a story about love: God's love for God's creation; God's call to love our neighbours, to do justice in all our human affairs, and to exercise responsible care for God's creation.

## **(ii) Covenant and Sabbath**

Sabbath is about the rhythm of the days of the weeks, the rhythm of work and rest, and a reminder of spiritual values. Sabbath is a sign that the creation is oriented towards the Kingdom of God's glory. Sabbath speaks to us about God's delight in creation, about the sacredness of the created order. It is Sabbath that underlies the Jubilee laws of Leviticus, with their reminder that the earth is the Lord's, and that the earth itself needs its rhythm of life in order to be replenished and sustained. This suggests the inescapable importance of living within

God-given limits – not only moral limits, but the physical limits of the carrying capacity of a finite earth, and the economic boundaries set by a finite planet.

*So we urgently need an Ethic of Restraint.* Suppose we had a world in which we were not all trying to consume as much as we could to keep GDP growing as though there were no boundaries, or in which we could significantly reduce our dependency on coal, oil and gas, and satisfy our energy needs in other ways. We would not be extracting so many resources from the earth, which would be more sustainable. The air would be cleaner and we could breathe more easily. Water would be cleaner and there would not be wars fought over fresh water. The land would be more fertile and our food security would be stronger. People who live in London or New York or Shanghai – not to mention the Solomon Islands – would not be afraid that their cities will flood. We could build a cleaner and healthier and better-fed world that is more just, with less poverty, and less anxiety about what the future will hold. Is that still within our reach? The time available is diminishing.

### **(iii) Covenant and Justice**

Justice is the social expression of what Jesus called neighbour-love. It was on the Sabbath in Nazareth that Jesus gives us the Jubilee text: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to

- bring good news to the poor
- release to the captives
- recovery of sight to the blind,
- to let the oppressed go free”.

The biblical prophets call for justice, especially for the poorest and most disadvantaged people. Climate change calls us to love and to do justice for our neighbours – including those overseas and those not yet born. Justice requires a fresh look at our economy: we need a different sort of economics, rooted in human values and geared to the common good of all creation. We need an *Ethic of Love and Justice*.

What might this mean in practice?

At a personal level, we try to restrain the drivers of over-consumption, radically restrain our consumer lifestyles, become more energy efficient, and reduce our own dependence on fossil-fuel energy.

At a *social* level, we work with others in our neighbourhoods, or with the local council, perhaps with farmers markets, or community

energy schemes, or managing waste disposal, or arguing for better local public transport and safer cycle lanes. We could develop more local democracy and local accountability – instead of being so bound by the power of global corporations.

At the *national* level, we hold our governments and corporations to account – to the legal obligations of the UK Climate Change Act (2008), and our national commitments under the 2015 Paris Agreement. We think about how our money is invested, how to create an economy which is not based on the assumption of unlimited growth, but on human values. We work to reduce our corporate dependency on fossil fuels, and for energy efficiency and a low carbon economy.

All in all we need to find a way to *bring economy, ecology and equity back into relationship again*. Against the tendencies to deism, which remove God from consideration, and against the ‘super-spiritualities’ that forget our human relationships with the earth, we need to recover the life-giving triangle: God, humanity and the earth.

### **(iv) Covenant and Hope**

Hope is a big covenant word, linked in the New Testament to the incarnation of Jesus and his resurrection from the dead – and rooted in the redemption and healing of the whole of creation. The incarnation is the repair for our cultural splits between body and spirit, nature and culture, science and ethics. Whereas John’s Donne wrote “Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone”, the Incarnation – at the centre of our triangle – is ‘coherence restored’: God, humanity and earth reconnected; the cosmic covenant fulfilled.

It is through Christ, says St Paul, that God reconciles all things to himself, making peace through the blood of the Cross. It is through Christ entering into the depths of disintegration, even to death, that reintegration, new coherence, healing and resurrection are possible, and the vision becomes one of the whole creation made new – or, as Hans Kung puts it,<sup>4</sup> “The Kingdom of God is creation healed”.

Hope does not mean the false optimism that imagines we humans have the key to all our problems. It does not mean the blind optimism that refuses to believe there is a problem at all. If our hope is optimistic, it is an optimism of grace. It is a hope such as sustained the NT writers in the face of various impending catastrophes in the ancient Roman world, a hope in the faithfulness of God – that the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it – and that the Lord, the Giver

of Life, even in the midst of the forces of death, has a purpose for God's creation which means the triumph of Love and Life over all the powers of destructiveness. An *Ethic of Hope in the Faithfulness of God* empowers us to live hopefully, and to redouble our endeavours to recover our human calling as God's image-bearers in responsible care for God's creation.

Can climate change be a wake-up call to live differently, more safely, more healthily, with more space for the human things money cannot buy: friendship, loyalty, communion, creativity, love. Can it provoke us into transformative action – a different way of living, informed by God's Wisdom, a rethinking of our desires, and the costly restraint that discipleship will entail?

Pope Francis's Encyclical provides a fitting conclusion. He celebrates creation as gift of God's love; grieves over our sin and selfishness; gives thanks to God for science and technology, but warns against a 'technocracy' unrestrained by morality. He pleads for a recovery of our humanness as God's joyous image-bearers in responsibly loving, cultivating and caring for God's earth. And he ends 'Laudato Si', mi Signore: Praise be to you, my Lord.'

*The Rt Revd David Atkinson was formerly Bishop of Thetford.  
His latest book Hope Rediscovered: biblical wisdom  
for an anxious world was published in 2018.*

## References

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## Notes

1. Developed first, I think, by Dr C J H Wright in *God's People in God's Land*, Eerdmans/Paternoster Press 1990.
2. *A Political Theology of Climate Change*, SPCK, 2014.
3. Nigel Lawson, *An appeal to reason*, Duckworth, 2009. And also of the Global Warming Policy Foundation: cf. my response to the GWPF briefing on the Papal Encyclical, available on Operation Noah website [www.operationnoah.org](http://www.operationnoah.org)
4. Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian*, Collins, 1977, p. 231.

