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CHRISTOLOGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

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Introduction

Global climate disruption, caused primarily by human activity, is perhaps the most urgent large-scale issue we face today.

I recognise there are debates about the extent of change in the climate, about the relevant scientific data and theories, and about the extent to which human activity is responsible for change. Similarly, there are considerable debates about what we should be doing in the light of the information we have in order to, for example, reduce CO2 emissions.

I'm not going to enter into any of those debates, but I want to begin from the premise that climate change in some form is taking place and that human activity has contributed and is contributing to that change.

Further, I begin by noting that up to this point the greatest human impact has come from industrialised, predominantly capitalist, countries, and these countries continue to be major contributors to climate change. These countries are those that have been identified, at least in the past, as "Christian countries" – from Europe and North America and some of their colonies. For some time links have been made between Christian ideas and the development of science and its extension into industry, and capitalism as an economic model (the work of R.H. Tawney is a good example).

I want to argue today that Christian ideas have contributed to the world views that have led to the activities that are producing the climate change we now experience. Christian understandings of human life, of the non-human world, of the use humans can make of resources 'out there', of the importance of human needs and goals in the scheme of things – all add to the way many have thought and acted over the last 250 years, and still do.

Ecological Theologies

Christian theologians and other thinkers are beginning to pick up on this, and various forms of 'eco-theology' are now appearing. Ecology is becoming a theological concern.

Many have shifted 'creation' thinking, for example, to recognise that humans have a *responsibility of care* for the earth and all its life. This includes such things as stressing stewardship rather than domination in undertaking positive re-interpretations of Genesis 1:26 (and related passages). Thus we become 'caretakers' rather than 'subduers' of the earth. An important move.

Others are acknowledging that we are *part of our environment* as organic components of an inter-connected system; that we live *in* the earth rather than *on* it: “humans from the humus” as Phyllis Trible translates Genesis 2:7. Thus we have a more holistic and integrated theological view, in which we humans are one part of the total ecological system, and are not ‘external’ to our environment, in a way that enables us to see it as ‘other’ and so to manipulate and to exploit it.

We are gradually building into our theology the awareness that we humans cannot live on our own, without concern for our environment. Ecology is on the theological radar.

The Priority of Human Life

I suggest this turn to the ecological raises questions about whether it is right to consider human life as having priority over all other parts of the planet. As I look at it, the very nature of humanity and human relationship to God comes into question.

Maybe we need to re-assess the way we give supreme value to human life. Sometimes this leads to a rather twisted perspective that forgets birth is a risky activity and that death is a natural event. It is an approach that increasingly uses scarce resources (especially in the medical field), and so adds to the damage to the environment. How might we re-theologise so that all creation is valued, depending on the situation, rather than assuming the priority of humans?

In fact, evidence is mounting that limiting our co-operation and respect to the human community is inadequate, and potentially very damaging. If we keep putting human life as the supreme value, then we humans are likely to destroy all life on this planet. It’s more than ecology on its own, it’s a matter of redesigning our core values. Reassessment of the centrality of human life is both a theological and ethical challenge.

As we humans do what *we* want, as we aim to make *our* life more comfortable, as we put *human* life in the centre of our value-system, we use more and more of the earth’s resources and damage our environment, perhaps irrevocably. We just can’t keep on exploiting this planet for *our* sole benefit.

Christology and Human Priority

My core concern today is the way our views of ‘Jesus’ and ‘Christ’ feed into wider thinking. Our christologies are rather a mix of ideas, all designed to stress the significance of Jesus for us and to speak of Jesus’ relationship with God. At their heart is some version of a doctrine of incarnation: God takes on human form and human flesh in the person of Jesus.

I suggest we consider how that view feeds the problems I have raised: Does God really take flesh *only* in a human person, to save *only* human beings? Does that view not ‘pump up’ human views of humanity in relation to everything else? I think we need to face very seriously the idea that many of our Christological views contribute to global warming, by undergirding a “human life is most important” attitude. We Christians could do with a much bigger vision than that, one that matches what we know is happening in our world today. Sticking to such a doctrinal or theological position, in its narrow traditional form, seems only to perpetuate the world view that is damaging our planet.

From this perspective, I suggest we are being pushed to re-think the theology of incarnation – and therefore the traditional basis of our Christology. Humanity's view of itself as somehow 'above' all other parts of creation, more important than the rest, with human life having the highest value and human needs being served by the resources of the rest, is sustained by the view that God has taken human flesh in order to save humanity. Generally, this says that it is human flesh *only* that God has taken, in Jesus.

Such an approach not only supports the view that humans are the 'top of the tree' of creation. It also suggests that salvation (regarded as the core activity of God in Jesus the Christ) has little to do either with the lives of non-human parts of creation or with human activity in relation to humanity's ecological environment.

This is such a central piece of Christian thinking that it is very difficult for us to re-think. Yet it is one of the pegs that hold in place aspects of creation theologising that keep diminishing non-human creation and enable humans to validate their ongoing destruction of the planet's ecology, and their continual misuse and overuse of its other inhabitants and its resources. If we say that God thinks humans are so important that God becomes one of us, that inevitably underlines our highest status in the order of created beings. It readily leads to a sense of 'right' that justifies our doing what we want with all else. It is a form of 'colonisation', in which the indigenous non-humans can be dealt with however we like because they are seen to be of lesser worth.

Some Possible Moves

If we were to think of God as *within* creation, and not as a separate being outside of creation, that might help us to respect and value the whole of creation. So a panentheistic view (in which God is understood to be within the whole of creation) might assist us here, allied perhaps with insights from some forms of process theology. This would enable us to understand all parts of creation as 'alive with God', and as dynamic interconnected components of a single whole. Sallie McFague's approach, suggesting we see "the world as God's Body", could help us move in this direction. From this perspective, we can think of God as 'incarnate' in the whole world, not only in one human being.

If we could come to think of creation as being 'energised' in all its parts by the active presence of God, with humans as one part of the total organism of creation, then all of this is to be valued and cared for, without assuming humans have a privileged place or special value. Then perhaps, we will work to heal the earth rather than continue to use it up and change is balance to suit ourselves and our selfish needs.

This, of course, requires us to separate the concepts surrounding 'Christ' from their firm attachment to the person 'Jesus', in whatever way we think of that connection. There *are* traditions within Christian thinking that broaden the presence of Christ from the individual man Jesus, extending it to communities that express Christic being and acting. Some understandings of the Church as 'the body of Christ' go in this direction (and I think Paul has that version in 1 Corinthians, before his dynamic holistic vision of the Christian community as being the embodiment of Christ was altered by the use of household imagery in which Christ is the 'head'). Some feminist theological approaches extend the idea to any groups that act-out the liberating and justice-focused vision associated with the presence of Christ.

I hope we might focus our attention here, recognising that any Christology – including that of the early Church Councils – is a reflection of the priorities and idea-world of those that put them together. Like all theology, it is a symbolic meaning-making activity rather than a description of 'the way things are'. In the face of potentially catastrophic climatic threats and over-reaching human-centredness and human domination, can we be courageous enough to do some Christological re-thinking?

Salvation

This will include our discussion of 'salvation'. One issue in this context is the inherent human focus of our received soteriological theology: it is *we* who are to be saved. The human Jesus as Christ comes into the world to save human believers. (Though it might be possible to interpret "the world" in John 3:16 in a way that broadens out the saving plan.) Can we include other aspects of God's creation in the scope of salvation?

For that to be effective, we also need to broaden out the view of salvation to what I consider is closer to the First Testament base. It seems to me that in the First Testament the idea of salvation is primarily about rescue from death, and from all threatens our life and well-being (illness, enemies, and so on). Returning to this base from the spiritualised and sin-focused view, could then enable us to see "saving the planet" as a justifiable expression of the salvation we preach.

So one possibility is to think of salvation as no longer centred on humans and no longer related principally to sin, to our spiritual health and to our personal relationship with God. Our focus then broadens out from the individual, from the human, and from the spiritual, to include collective humanity, all of creation, and the physical structures and sources of energy of the total ecosystem.

That's a big view of salvation. It includes not only whether my relationship with God is OK, but also whether I'm prepared to abandon my SUV for the sake of the climate, and whether I'm prepared to argue in support of carbon taxes, and whether I can relate to God in mountain and sea as much as in church.

Conclusion

The critical situation we have created through climate disruption suggests it is imperative to look at these core theological points. We cannot afford to have *any* piece of our theology that gives validity to human dominance – or we are in real danger of destroying all of God's good creation.

Climate-friendly theology will begin by recognising human responsibility for the environment and pointing towards ways by which we can mend and sustain that environment. It might appropriately go further to reconsider God's incarnate presence as infusing all things, and God's plan for salvation extending to all creation. As we work with God, as components in God's good creation, that work will be about saving our ecosystem. It will be about saving coastlines, the atmosphere, clean drinking water, threatened plant and animal species – and ourselves along the way as part of all that.