

THE ENVIRONMENT, SCIENCE AND RELIGION.

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Why religion?

On June 19th this year, an article appeared in The Guardian, a left of centre newspaper in the UK: 'Faith can make a vital contribution to both Democracy and Scientific Ethics'¹. 'For the first time in a generation, religion is part of the national conversation; people want to talk and read about it... The collapse of communism and the decline of socialism has left a vacuum of purpose, value and meaning on both the left and the right'

By this, the writer meant that there was a vacuum of meaning for those who had equated progress with consumption, such that the meaning and purpose of life was the acquisition of material goods. This had proved to be unsatisfying, and having tried secular materialism, people had begun to look for something more.

By way of contrast, the last census in the UK asked people to declare their religion. People could tick a box to say they followed one of any number of faiths. Or they could say they had no religious faith. This question about religion had never been asked before, and the response came as a great surprise to all those who had declared that we lived in a secular society: over 70% declared themselves to be Christian, when in the privacy of their own homes, they could have said they had no religious faith. Our ethnic minority communities declared their own faiths, and the result was that, far from being a secular society, the overwhelming majority in the UK choose to identify themselves as people of faith.

In a democracy, this has to be significant, even though we could never have guessed the true situation had we believed the media. The national media in the UK- and I am sure this is true elsewhere - reflect mainly the concerns of a small number of people in the centres of politics,

¹ Madeleine Bunting in the Guardian

administration and business. In our case, that is London: Westminster, Whitehall and the City.

Environmental issues used to be called the sleeping giant in politics. That giant has now woken up, as the reality of our present situation can no longer be ignored or presented with a greenwash to appease activists. Religion is the new giant - not so much sleeping, but until now ignored as irrelevant, a weekend occupation for the elderly. Religion is now recognised as a major factor in world politics, and *all great faiths teach about the role of human beings in the creation.*

Judaism and Christianity share the teaching and vision of the Hebrew Scriptures which Christians call the Old Testament:

- that the world has been created, in other words, that there is a Creator;
- and that human beings have a special role and responsibility within the creation.

Knowledge about the creation is discovered; it is already there. Humans do not, in the end, make the rules; in the case of scientific disciplines, we discover them, and in the case of religion, they are usually revealed. Islam teaches that environmental degradation is a sign from God that the world is not living in accordance with the divine will. *Someone is trying to make new rules.* All the religions of the Book [Judaism, Christianity and Islam] agree that there is divine proportion and balance in the creation, and to live in harmony with this plan is the true wisdom.

Over ten years ago, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the spiritual leader of the Orthodox Christians, initiated a series of remarkable water borne Symposia to address the issue of Religion, Science and the Environment. His action was prophetic. For many years he and his predecessor had been concerned about the environment, especially with the state of the world's waters. How was it possible that, with all the scientific expertise available, the

world was in such a dire state?² The Patriarch said that pollution was the symptom of a spiritual condition, that something had gone seriously wrong with the way human beings saw themselves and their place in the world. How was it possible, said a Symposium speaker when we were approaching Venice, that human beings could create such an admirable culture and destroy their natural environment at the same time?³

In his inaugural sermon last year, Pope Benedict said something very similar: ‘The external deserts in the world are growing because the internal deserts have become so vast.’ He too emphasised that the problems in the environment are symptoms of a spiritual sickness.

Human beings are no longer comfortable in the environment that they themselves have made. They have created themselves in a new image that does not satisfy, and this new ethos has distorted the whole world. If everyone had the lifestyle and consumption of New York, we are told, we should need five planets, but we have only one. Globalisation means sharing with everyone on the globe, and that means less for a few and more for everyone else.

Humans have been encouraged to see themselves as no more than producers and consumers in the global economy. The religions of the world teach people that their true worth is not to be reckoned in what they possess, but there are attractive voices offering something else, beamed into the poorest of villages and tempting people with glimpses of so called prosperity.

In the Book of Genesis, this choice of materialism was expressed in the simple but vivid picture language of the Bible: ‘You are dust and to dust you shall return.’ [Genesis 3. 19]. The modern way of knowing the world and living in it has been reducing everything to dust. Something has happened to knowledge and wisdom has been lost. A contribution to our recent Symposium in Brazil spoke of the spread of reductionism that had contaminated almost all sectors of society, especially in the West. ‘We have ended up with a collection of

² The Patriarch in the Aegean Symposium

³ Metropolitan John in the Adriatic Symposium

disconnected efforts with nobody joining up the dots.’⁴ One of the wise sayings in the Hebrew Scriptures says: ‘When there is no vision, the people unravel’ (Proverbs 29.18). In other words, human society and human lives disintegrate. And now we see the creation itself disintegrating, because the vision has been lost.

The Symposium links the secularisation of knowledge and the fragmentation resulting from increased specialisation; both have contributed to loss of an awareness of creation as a whole. The Symposium contrasts knowledge and wisdom. Wisdom is knowledge transformed by a particular vision. The biblical picture in the Book of Genesis is that humans chose to eat from the wrong tree in the Garden of Eden. They had been intended to eat from the Tree of Life, that is, the tree whose fruit was Wisdom, but instead chose the tree of secular knowledge that could lead to good or evil. They were deceived into choosing a different way of knowing and living.

The Patriarch’s first water borne Symposium took place on the Aegean Sea in September 1995. It must have seemed strange – a distinguished gathering of some 200 scientists, religious leaders of many faiths, philosophers, economists, lawyers, artists and policy makers, along with media people and secretarial support – all together for a week on a Greek car ferry. But that is how this remarkable venture began. Over the years a body of experience has been built up, and we have just completed our sixth Symposium which was the first outside Europe. After concentrating on the Black Sea, the River Danube, the Adriatic and then the Baltic, we went this summer to the Amazon.

The format of the Symposia is simple but effective; people meet together, share their ideas and their worries, share their expertise and their hopes for the future. They meet initially as strangers but after a week together on a boat, they part as friends who have learned together and from each other. There have been many practical results of the Symposia, apart from the personal friendships formed during the week: toxic waste cleared away after the publicity brought by the Symposium, for example, trees planted, water ways restored.

⁴ Antonio Nobre, in the Amazon Symposium

The most important result, however, cannot be measured; people have the confidence to think differently. They see their own knowledge and expertise, and the power and the responsibility they have as a result, in a new way.

On June 10th 2002, in Venice, the late Pope [by video link due to his illness] and the Patriarch jointly signed a declaration on the Environment. These are a few extracts.

- ‘Respect for creation stems from respect for human life and dignity.
- ‘Christians and all other believers have a specific role to play in proclaiming moral values and in educating people in ecological awareness...
- ‘The problem is not simply economic and technological; it is moral and spiritual. A solution at the economic and technological level can be found only if we undergo, in the most radical way, an inner change of heart which can lead to a change in lifestyle and of unsustainable patterns of consumption and production.

This is now guidance for all Catholic and Orthodox Christians.

At the end of the year, the Pope said that signing this declaration was the most important thing he had done in 2002.

The Symposium uses the word ‘repentance’, in the original sense of ‘changing one’s mind’. *To change what we see we have first to change how we see it.* In other words, the Symposium asks for a paradigm shift in our thinking, such that the insights of the great religions can contribute to the debate. The very first Symposium spoke of sin against nature. Christians [and I am sure the other faiths too] had always acknowledged that some acts were wrong, sins against God and their neighbours, sins against human society. Now there had to be a wider understanding of sin: some of the ways we were treating the world were, simply, wrong, and our actions were upsetting the whole balance of natural and human order. *Everything we knew how to do and could afford to do was not necessarily right.* There were other considerations. The Symposium does not offer solutions to those scientists and policy makers who are already experts in their field, but it does suggest new ways of looking at problems, a

new vision, or rather, the old vision that has somehow been lost in the quest for material progress.

And the Symposium also calls on the religious traditions to repent of much in their own past and present, and to recover their original vision. The Hebrew Scriptures are full of teaching about the glory and wonder of the creation, that everything exists to praise the Creator. The human being has a special role, and this brings great responsibility. This teaching is expressed in the vivid pictures and poetry of a pre-philosophical culture – a talking snake in the garden of Eden, for example - but the teaching is clear. Human beings are the priests of creation, and the care of creation is their worship. Justice and righteousness are for the natural world and not just for human society. Denying justice to the creation results in catastrophe, a judgement that none can escape. Righteousness, in biblical discourse, is the state when everything is restored to its proper place, and justice is the means of effecting that restoration. It is essentially a healing process, putting things right.

Social ecology says that environmental problems have their roots in the social order and will only be overcome through a radical change in society, a political solution. A religious perspective suggests a deeper root: that problems in society and the resulting problems in the environment spring from the human heart and how human beings see themselves and their role in the creation. Are they the image of God, as the Bible says, caring for the creation, or are they just producers and consumers in an ever more destructive and unfair system?

The fundamental criterion for an environmental ethic is not individualistic or commercial, said the Patriarch⁵, speaking to an audience in wealthy Europe. The acquisition of goods cannot justify the self centred desire to control the natural resources of the world. We need to practise voluntary self limitation in all our consumption. The religious description of this is self sacrifice, and without this dimension, no environmental ethic can be successful. Sacrifice, not of others but of ourselves, is the missing dimension.

⁵ The Patriarch in Venice at the end of the Adriatic Symposium.

During the Amazon Symposium, a speaker from China told us about the pollution of his country's rivers. In the last two generations, he said, their leaders had declared war on nature, in stark contrast with their traditional religion which had venerated the great rivers. The cost of pollution was now very high indeed, and since 2002 there had been new policies to harmonise with nature. Rivers have rights, he said; they reflect the state of a civilisation⁶.

The Koran has even more teaching about the creation than the Hebrew Scriptures. Everything is created by God and belongs to Him. God is One, and the creation is One. He established laws for the creation, and gave humans signs by which to learn of them. Creation has a pattern and a purpose, is established with justice and balance that all believers should maintain. The whole creation praises God, and so any destruction diminishes the praise due to God. It is forbidden to waste God's gifts, and all will answer for their actions on the Day of Judgement. But how many people are made aware of this aspect of Islam? We hear all too much of the political elements, but almost nothing of the great teachings about the creation.

One of the problems in Western Christianity has been the emphasis [I would say over - emphasis] on one strand in the Bible: seeing the work of God in the pattern and unfolding of history, and neglecting the continual work of God in creation. This has had several unintended consequences; 'creation' came to be seen as the beginning of history, something that happened and was completed a long time ago. It was something done for the benefit of human beings who were then left in charge to do more or less as they wished. They had 'to subdue the earth and have dominion over every living thing that moves on the earth', as the traditional 17th century English translation of the Bible puts it [Genesis 1. 28]. A gentler modification of this position said the human being was the manager of the creation, but this too implied detachment from it. The result of this has been the assumption that resources are there for the taking, and that, to use the modern phrase, ecological services do not have to be paid for.

⁶ Yu Xiaogang in the Amazon Symposium.

The Eastern Church has had a different tradition of understanding, seeing the creation not as an event in the past, but as an ongoing relationship in the present. The doctrine of creation affirms that the world depends upon God for every moment of its existence. Human beings are very much a part of the system, rather than set over against it. We have to work in harmony with the creation, ensuring that there is, as the prophet Isaiah said, justice in the wilderness and righteousness in the fruitful field, and the effect of righteousness will be peace...’ (Isaiah 32.16-7).

There can be only one centre to the system of creation. All the religions of the Book teach that idolatry is the greatest sin, and having economics or politics at the centre of our systems is idolatry, setting up a god made with human hands. The Symposium discusses economics and ethics, recognising that business plays a vital part in environmental issues, but no matter how mighty the corporation, the creation must be respected. We learned recently of the huge cost to insurers of the recent hurricanes, a result of changes in the environment, triggered by human activity. We see the imminent disaster if ecological capital is used up instead of managed. One of the indigenous leaders in the Amazon told us how his people had first come into contact with money. How, he was asked, did it affect them? ‘We had to educate money’, he said, ‘so that it did not harm us’.

The crown of the creation is not - as is often supposed - the creation of human beings, but the Sabbath rest. The story at the beginning of the Bible says that after creating human beings, God rested when He saw that everything was very good. For Christians [and Jews] the goal should not be increased consumption, but the state where everything is very good⁷.

Everything has been brought to rest. Enough is enough. Limiting production is also part of the plan, but only when everything is very good. For everyone. *There is no place for growth without limit, with no end in view other than the process of growth itself.*

The insights of the great religions are not always comfortable. How can we sell self sacrifice - limiting our consumption - when a vast advertising industry is dedicated to making

⁷ J Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p.188.

consumption attractive, when economic systems depend on ever increasing consumption? It does not make economic sense to value every human being, to support the less able and the elderly who are no longer economically active. One could make greater profits by quietly getting rid of people who hinder economic growth. But we do not do that. Why? Because human beings know that such actions are wrong. We need to develop similar sensitivity towards the environment, recognising that some things, no matter how profitable and attractive in the short term, are simply wrong.