

Interfaith Eco Conference, Oxford, 21st Jan 2023

Panel discussion with perspectives from faith communities including references to sacred texts related to Creation Care.

Rabbi Dr Judith Rosen-Berry, Member of the Oxford Three Faiths Encounter Forum, presenting from a Jewish perspective.

Imam Monawar Hussain, Founder of the Oxford Foundation, presenting from a Muslim perspective.

Dr Arvinder J. Singh, Director of the Wellbeing Centre, Ashoka University, Delhi, presenting from a Sikh perspective.

The Rt Revd Olivia Graham, Bishop of Reading, presenting from a Christian perspective.

The State of Play – a Christian Response

My friends, fellow representatives of faith communities, it is a huge pleasure and privilege to be with you all today. I think that my task is to lay out, and reflect on the Environmental and climate challenge which faces us in this decade; to say something about why it matters from a faith perspective; and to offer some words of hope and encouragement, setting the scene for the rich engagement which is to follow.

We are gathered from a number of faith communities, which is a matter for great rejoicing! I was in Glasgow for the COP26 conference in 2021, and one of the things which was most striking and wonderful was the shared witness and determination of the faith leaders who were there. We prayed together, shared wisdom from our own scriptures and teachings, encouraged each other, emboldened each other, inspired each other, and built relationships of love and trust. There were memorable moments: a multi-faith vigil of prayer and meditation in George Square, with the heads of the Scottish Episcopal Church and the Church of Scotland sitting side by side! A Talanoa Dialogue in which we heard the voices and moving witness of 12 different faiths. Joint action and protest.

Ahead of the conference, faith leaders issued a statement to the Governments of the world:

We remind governments of their commitments made in Paris in 2015 to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees [above pre-industrial levels], and of Article 17 of the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights to protect the environment, the biosphere and biodiversity. We call upon them to take the urgent action needed to avert the loss, damage, and forced migration threatened by climate change."

And we committed to respond to this challenge by

- Reflecting deeply in prayer, meditation and worship to discern how to care for the Earth and each other,
- Making transformational change in our own lives and in the lives of our communities
- Being advocates for justice.

That is what we asked, together, in 2021. It is wonderful to be here today with friends of other faiths, to continue this work.

I guess that we are all here because we recognise that we have an environmental and climate crisis. Of all the difficulties which we currently face, this is the big one; the one which presents us with an urgent and existential challenge; the one we have ignored for too long, hoping it will go away, or that the scientists have been mistaken; or that the maths is wrong; or that the now regular fury of the bush fires, the tornadoes, the storms and the floodwaters is just a blip and that normal climate service will be resumed next year or the year after.

Sadly, it turns out that the science is accurate; the sums do add up; the extreme weather events are here to stay, and to increase in ferocity whatever we do. This is the new normal, and there is no returning to the climate stability of the past 10,000 years.

What on earth are we doing to creation? In the last 400 generations, humankind has inhabited the Holocene age. A benign and stable climate has seen the human race go from the scattered tribes of spear-carriers and fire-raisers who emerged from their caves at the end of the last Ice Age, to become the first farmers, metallurgists, urban dwellers, industrialists and now the 7.8 billion inhabitants of a digitised, globalised world.

We are now in the Anthropocene age. The age in which we human beings, and our activity, has a significant effect on the Earth's ecosystems. And one extremely dangerous aspect of this is, of course, anthropogenic climate change.

Our current level of warming is around 1.2°C. above pre-industrial levels, and this already has significant impacts on our weather systems. The IPCC projects what will happen when we pass 1.5°C and head towards 2°C - now pretty inevitable because to avoid it would require halving our global carbon emissions within the next 8 years.

This doesn't look like it's going to happen. Our action to date has been feeble, and our inaction entrenched. We have been spectacularly hidebound by our determination that nothing should get in the way of me, living my life as I want to, that there is now a very real danger of runaway warming as a series of tipping points are reached and surpassed, and the feedback loops take over. This is how it works:

The acceleration of melting ice at the poles is destabilising their great ice sheets, causing sea levels to rise by several metres over a few decades. This will happen whatever we do. We can no longer reverse this.

The melting ice interrupts the north Atlantic ocean circulation, which then alters global weather patterns, including the Gulf Stream which warms our islands, and ultimately switches off the Asian monsoon season.

And as the land warms in the polar regions, frozen methane (a potent greenhouse gas) will bubble up out of the melting Siberian permafrost in volumes that would raise global temperatures by several degrees more.

This is potentially a disaster for the human race and for many other species. And it's not a natural disaster, but one caused by human agency. The Anthropocene.

All over the world people are already being forced to reassess the viability of the places they call home. The low lying islands are the first to face this reality. And already some have been submerged by the rising seas, and the people who live on them have been forced to leave their homes and move to other places.

It has started. But it doesn't have to continue. It is still possible for us to avoid the most extreme scenario. We have choices to make, and we can still choose life.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

Climate warming is of course part of a much greater crisis. Biodiversity is essential to human survival. The biodiversity of our planet is the result of 3.8 billion years of evolution.

The UN's 2019 Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity, tells us that, due to human impact on the environment in the past half-century, the Earth's biodiversity has suffered a catastrophic decline unprecedented in human history. We are headed for a 6th mass extinction. In the last half century about 50% the world's animals have been lost. Of all the mammals left on Earth, only 4% are wild mammals, 36% are humans, and a whopping 60% now are livestock. 70% of all the bird biomass on the planet is now made up of poultry. More than 40% of insect species are declining and a third are endangered. Three quarters of the crop types we grow rely on insect pollination.

We are in an age where our impact as a species is having a catastrophic effect on the species we share our planet with. And the irony of this is that we **need** this biodiversity to ensure our own flourishing.

We rely on nature – for food, building materials, warmth, textiles, the active ingredients in medicines, and much more. And there are other vital functions that nature provides, the filtering of air and water, the enrichment of soil, and protection against floods. Our human existence in the current age is at serious risk because of our increasingly rapid destruction of the very systems that support life on earth.

We are not, as many of us would like to think, a species which stands at the very apex of a pyramid of creation. We are an integral part of a highly complex web of life on Earth which operates as a complex adaptive system. What happens in one part of it impacts all other parts, for good or ill. Our human actions in the past half century have largely been for ill.

And it doesn't take us long to see that many of the pressures we are putting on the natural world are in fact symptoms of wider and deeper issues: unsustainable patterns of consumption, demographic change and globalisation.

So why am I, a Bishop in the Church of England, talking about all this? Why do I believe that it is an issue of faith, a religious issue, rather than one which simply relates to our rather selfish concern to continue to exist as a species?

I would start to explain this with three words, faith, hope and love. I'll take them in reverse order.

Love: our bedrock and our starting point. Our Scriptures teach us: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength. Love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. All the rest is commentary.

To love is to long for the best for the other; to seek their flourishing; to weep when they weep; to rejoice when they rejoice. To put their interests above our own. Love is both the power behind the creation of the universe and all that is in it, and also the glue which binds us to each other. It is there in the Golden Rule, held in common by all the major faiths, which is probably the most universal ethical tenet in human history.

It is there in the concept of Ubuntu – I exist in and through you. The idea that relationship is the bedrock of human society. Ubuntu suggests common humanity, oneness, shared interest, empathy, concern. Love. God loves us all equally. God has no favourites, God sends both the sun and the rain on rich and poor alike. Without love, we are nothing.

Hope: We don't, as religious people, have a monopoly on hope, but our hope as people of faith is based on more than Pollyanna-ish optimism, goodwill or good intent.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, 'Hope is a human virtue, but one with religious underpinnings. At its ultimate is the belief that God is mindful of our aspirations, with us in our fumbling efforts. That He has given us the means to save us from ourselves; that we are not wrong to dream, wish and work for a better world. Hope is the knowledge that we can choose; that we can learn from our mistakes and act differently next time.' And how we need to do that!

My Christian faith teaches me that indeed, we were created good, and we have the means and the mechanism to turn constantly and regularly towards the good, towards the goodness and compassion of God; to admit our failings and failures, our selfishness and lack of love, knowing that we are forgiven, and enabled to begin afresh each day. Christians believe that through Christ, we are united forever with God, and we live in the now and not yet outworking of this. And in this is my hope. New every morning. Knowing that each day I can make choices which will make a difference, and that I can turn away from, and repent of the wrong choices I made yesterday.

Faith: our faith is based on what we read of God in our scriptures, what we hear of God in our teachings, and what we know of God from our experience and our tradition. There will be much more about this from the perspective of 3 other faiths in the panel discussion which is to follow. But I believe that respect for the natural world and concern for environmental care is embedded as a message in all of our scriptures.

In the Hebrew and Christian scriptures we read of a call to live in balance with God's creation, in a way which protects the natural world. We are acutely aware that the profound disruption of the world's ecosystems, pollution, environmental degradation, species loss, viral pandemic, and so on are not the way that God intends for us to be and for God's world to be. We have a responsibility to work to restore the balance between people and nature.

Here's another word which we recognise as of crucial importance. Justice.

The climate crisis is very clearly a justice issue, and as people of faith and as faith communities it must concern us deeply. The Judeo-Christian teachings are very insistent that the God whom we recognise as our Creator, the God of love, who insists that we love each other, is very, very keen on Justice.

We acknowledge God's concern for the poor, the marginalised, the vulnerable, the stranger and refugee. We hear of the cause of the wronged being righted; those who wield power needing to have a special care for the weak.

The issue of justice lies at the heart of the climate crisis because the costs of it are not evenly spread.

The poorest countries in the world, the ones which did almost nothing to create the crisis, which have not developed their economies using vast quantities of fossil fuels, and which are now trying to develop their economies and raise the standards of living for their populations, they do not have the economic resources either to pay for mitigation or adaptation, or to compensate for the loss and damage wrought by our decades of inaction.

Here is an issue which links to our faith. As people of faith we have a responsibility to raise our voices for those who cannot.

SPIRITUAL ISSUES

And at its heart, we are dealing with spiritual issues. We have disrupted the ecological balance of all that God created on earth, and we owe it to God and to each other and to all the species we share the planet with, to try to restore the balance. How?

Gus Speth, former Dean of Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies [is reported to have] said: *'I used to think that the top global environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address these problems, but I was wrong. The top env problems are selfishness, greed and apathy, and to deal with these we need a spiritual and cultural transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that.'*

But we people of faith do know how to do that. This is the greatest physical and spiritual challenge humanity has ever faced. Nearly 85% of the world's population identifies with a faith group. And we have the tools and the understanding to go right to heart of the challenge.

We're here as complex social creatures. We are citizens; we are consumers making choices, we are parents and grandparents of the generations which will inherit this challenge. And we are people of faith. And the environmental challenges which affect us, all of them, are at heart spiritual issues.

It is a time for spiritual honesty. Because the mess we are in is as a direct result of our human failings. We are beings who all too easily slip into greed, self-centredness, lack of love and compassion, apathy, unwillingness to put anything else but ourselves at the centre of the universe and of our existence. And often, we only pay attention to the wellbeing of others when it doesn't take anything away from our own prosperity and enjoyment; when it doesn't actually cost us anything.

Well, this is going to cost us dear. Not just in taxes, and lifestyle choices.

The challenges we face are outside of us. But they start inside us. We have a sickness in our souls which needs to be faced - greed, avarice, envy, sloth, covetousness. And it's easier to face it in company with

others, which is why our faith communities join together with others – in Eco-Church; in Eco-Synagogue, Eco-Sikh, Hindu Climate Action, Eco Dharma, with the mosques and the Quakers, in networks and honest conversations. We do this together.

What shall we do? We are living in the real world.

There's no putting the genie back in the bottle. We are not going to return to a life of hunter-gathering, simplicity, back to nature and very basic consumption. That ship has sailed. We are bound up in a highly complex financial and economic web which is global in its reach. There is a lot of discussion about whether global capitalism has reached its limits, given its inbuilt insistence on constant growth in a world which has finite natural resources.

The economist Kate Raworth has proposed an economic model which has been widely picked up, known as doughnut economics. If you haven't read her book of the same name, I highly recommend it.

One of the things which she points out is that our behaviour and choices are very powerfully influenced by other peoples' behaviour and choices. This partly explains the rise in 'conspicuous consumption' since WW2 as advertising has gained in power and reached further, wider, and deeper. We all know about 'Keeping up with the Joneses'.

Economists have traditionally sought to change peoples' behaviour by changing the relative price of things, but this has often failed to achieve what they have hoped, because these price signals are drowned out by much stronger signals which are coming from social networks.

This is, in fact, very good news. It means that if we make choices which are good and not bad for the environment, and if we do it visibly, and if we talk to others about it in our faith communities and social groups, and if enough of us do it, there is a real probability of wider behavioural change. We saw it in the way in which drink driving has become more and more socially unacceptable. We've started to see it in lots of aspects of environmental care – we turn lights out more often; we sort our rubbish; we grow bee-friendly plants in our gardens or leave parts of them a little wild, and so on. And we live in a society and a world which is highly networked. So there is a real possibility for traction.

We need a major infusion of energy to help faith groups inspire behavioural change for sustainable living.

What messages shall we give? Here are 4 quick headlines:

To consume in moderation. To consider the question *How much is enough? How much do I need, as opposed to want, knowing how much I am conditioned to want what I do not need.*

To use our voices, our platforms and our influence. We are more powerful than we think. We are fortunate to live in a parliamentary democracy. We can speak with spiritual and moral authority for a swift and just transition to a sustainable future.

To be farsighted, to keep the far distant future in sight – the future of our children and grandchildren and their grandchildren– so that we keep in view the effects of our actions, or the consequences of our inactions now.

Not to lose hope. We can do this if we act now. If we act personally, locally, nationally and globally, and if we act together, each playing our part – the part we have been given, in this planetary drama which is being played out principally in the next decade.

Action suggestions

Our actions are the true indication of our commitment. Here are 6 practical things we can do:

- 1) Reinvigorate the teachings of our faiths on the care of creation, in our teachings, talks and sermons
- 2) Actualise these teachings by promoting Earth stewardship and sustainable living to their congregations and communities
- 3) Encourage the greening of places of worship, community centres, and spaces where people gather, so that they minimise the impact on natural resources
- 4) Use our platforms to give a voice to activists, to call for a just transition, and to stand up for the rights of the vulnerable people most affected by the impacts of climate change (including young people, women, children, the poor, refugees and asylum seekers)
- 5) Use our influence to hold local authority and government agencies to account on climate and biodiversity targets
- 6) Work with other groups and individuals, both faith and non-faith, who are committed to this cause.