

St. George's Lecture : 1st June, 2007

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“Faith and the Future of the Earth”

(America – Evangelicals and the Environment)

Your Royal Highnesses, your Excellencies, My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr Dean I thank you and the Trustees for the great honour of giving the St George's Lecture.

The American Satirist Robert Orban once said “There's so much pollution in the air now that if it weren't for our lungs there'd be no place to put it all”.

As we sit under the flight path of Heathrow where each day flights in and out of the airport send tons of carbon into the atmosphere we're only too aware of the pollution and its effects.

I think it's important to preface any talk about the environment by a simple confession that we're all hypocrites. Very little human activity has no impact on the environment. I confess that I too have flown by budget airlines! Not so long ago I was clutching my Easyjet ticket, dressed casually (not in a 'dog collar') and boarding a plane in Belfast to fly to the John Lennon International Airport in Liverpool. The storm clouds were gathering. We flew through the most almighty storm. Nobody spoke, nobody moved as we were thrown around the skies. On landing the man next to me began talking “I knew this would be a bad flight”, he said, “but I didn't tell you as I didn't want to frighten you! Actually I'm an airline pilot. What do you do?” “Actually”, I said, “I'm a priest but I didn't tell you because I didn't want to frighten you!”

Sixteen years ago Sir Crispin Tickell was giving this very lecture on “Climate and Life : Change and Diversity”. It was a prophetic essay and worth revisiting especially his comment that “the bridge between science and politics, between thought and action, has rarely looked more fragile” (Page 165). Although over the last decade the climate of opinion has begun to change (but not nearly so much as the atmospheric climate) and politicians have begun to speak ever more passionately about our predicament, there is still a chasm between the rhetoric and the resolution to act strategically. Sir Crispin identified one of the problems, “Perhaps the most baffling factor of all is the world view we inherited from the past. I am afraid that the organised religions carry a major responsibility”.

In this lecture I would like to explore particularly the relationship between evangelicals and the environment and especially the impact this has in America and on America and therefore on the rest of the world.

This year's Reith Lecturer Dr. Jeff Sachs opened up his series on the global population explosion by challenging the role of America and urging on it a greater sense of interdependence with the rest of the world.

It is estimated that up to 45% of the electorate voting for the Republican Party are either Evangelical Christians or at least in sympathy with that world view and that this constituency is one of the most influential lobbies in American politics. It is not an exaggeration to say that we will not understand how America acts in the world until we understand the way many in America read the Bible. You may think that extraordinary. Certainly as we tiptoed towards the third millennium few predicted the major role that religion would play in the 21st century. In 1998 HRH Crown Prince El Hassam bin Talal of Jordan gave this lecture on the subject of Islam. And it is Islam in the Arab world and Evangelical Christianity in America that now offer ideological and religious frameworks of immense political potency.

Now a subject of one Kingdom ought to be very cautious about speaking of another nation, although these lectures have always had an international character, the first having been given by the American Ambassador to Great Britain. So it is with great caution that I speak about America. But I do so as a friend and one who deeply regrets the demonisation of America. In his controversial book "DC Confidential" Sir Christopher Meyer once our Ambassador in Washington shared the advice he gave annually to the Embassy's newest recruits.

"The core of my message was always the same: think of the US as a foreign country; then you will be pleasantly surprised by the many things you find in common with this most generous and hospitable of peoples. Think of America as Britain writ large and you risk coming to grief; American attitudes to patriotism, religion, crime and punishment, schooling, sex, the outside world, can be very different from those of Europeans, including the British. For the novice British diplomat it comes as a shock to discover that most Americans, whether Republican or Democrat, sophisticate or redneck, believe that their country's actions in the world are intrinsically virtuous; and more fool those countries that do not recognise this. The attitude of Britain's Victorians was very similar".

By the way and in parenthesis talking about Victorians and given this setting in Windsor and the subject of my lecture, I can't help remarking on the prescient example offered us by Queen Victoria and her aversion to carbon. She had a rooted objection to both coal and gas and kept the big windows open all the time. She made sure the room temperature never exceeded 63° and well ahead of her time maintained a commendably low royal carbon footprint – although it has to be said much to the discomfort of Disraeli who although he loved the Queen hated having to stay especially at Balmoral!

I digress! Returning to my theme: one of those tribes that has a high view of America and its role in the world - so high that some would even believe it to be God-given – is the Evangelical constituency.

Mindful of Meyer's caution it is the Evangelical movement in America that I wish to address not least because of its enormous political influence. I too stand in that tradition but I hasten to add that it is the tradition of Thomas Cranmer, the Earl of Shaftesbury and William Wilberforce whose extraordinary achievement in securing the abolition of the Slave Trade in the British Parliament we celebrate this year. In religious terms that Act which transformed the moral landscape of the British Empire owed its ethical and spiritual impetus to a coalition of Quakers and Evangelical Christians. Indeed, according to one historian, Kathleen Heasman, evangelicalism before it retreated back into an individualistic pietism was responsible for three quarters of the social reform of 19th Century in Great Britain.

Although evangelicalism in America shares some of the same roots it has grown into a very different garden, but there's just enough common ground for dialogue across the pond and there are some heroic leaders who are courageously challenging hitherto cherished positions. At the risk of gross oversimplification there's grown up a chasm of distrust between evangelicals and environmentalists. The former see the latter as New Age, Pagan, Liberal and Democrat! These words are anathema to evangelical Christians who politically inhabit a position to the right of centre. The latter see the former as rapists of the earth, responsible for pulling out of the Kyoto Protocol and putting into the White House an enemy of the environment who wants to rewrite the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act and to open the Artic Wildlife Refuge to drilling.

I first became aware of the tension when in 2002 I was invited to give the Galt Lectures in Charlottesville Virginia which are now in a book called "Jesus and the Earth". (I should add that I once wrote a book called "Why do People Suffer?" When the proofs came back from the printers they had left out the question-mark so the title of the book ran "Why do People Suffer James Jones"! This has in fact been what the Diocese of Liverpool has been thinking for the last nine years!)

In a seminar on Faith and Sustainable Development at the World Bank in Washington I became aware of the source of the resistance by Evangelicals to the environmental agenda. Again, at the risk of gross oversimplification many see the environment as bad religion, bad science, bad business and bad for America.

In an article in the New York Review called ' Endgame' Tim Flannery who, in a recent book, has coined the phrase "we have become the weathermakers" reviews some of the latest major books on the environment including Harvey Blatt's "America's Environmental Report Card : Are we making the Grade?". Blatt writes "Americans share three common beliefs about environmental regulation and the economy. One is that environmental rules cause widespread unemployment. Another is that environmental regulation has led to many plant shut-downs and aggravated unemployment at the local level. And a third belief is that environmental regulation has caused lots of companies to build new plants overseas". Flannery quotes a recent Pew Center poll showing that 41% of Americans considered "environmental activists" to be "extremists"!

In a conversation with a leading and influential American Evangelical I was made aware of the depth of fear that drives the resistance to the environmental agenda. He saw environmentalism as the Trojan horse that would bring the country to its knees; having seen off communism he feared they would now fall victim to the new left-wing conspiracy that would destroy America. He sincerely believed that the response needed from God-fearing, flag-loving Americans was to be vigilant and sceptical about the scientific claims about climate change, to be protective of American business and jobs and to challenge the godless liberalism that undermined traditional moral virtues especially in the area of family values.

In another article in the New York Review entitled “Welcome to Doomsday” Bill Moyes charts how it is “a coupling of ideology and theology that threatens our ability to meet the growing ecological crisis”. In particular, he shows how evangelical Christianity’s predictions about the end of the world influence some evangelical’s attitude to the earth. If I were to summarise his thesis and this world view it would be something like this: “Because the Bible says that one day the earth will end up in a ball of flames, you might as well milk the earth for all it’s worth while you’ve got time”. Couple this with a view that everything on earth has come into being for us to enjoy and even exploit and you can almost understand why you could if not in good conscience certainly not with a bad one pull out of Kyoto and merrily emit into the atmosphere 25% of the world’s carbon. To the chagrin of the likes of Bill Moyes this world view is broadcast through many of the 1,600 Christian radio stations and 250 Christian TV stations across America carrying votes on the crest of the airwaves into the polling booths against environmental change.

Last year as a follow-up to the G8 Summit at Gleneagles the Foreign Office hosted in London a gathering of political assistants from Congress. The programme included the usual exposure to the Treasury, DEFRA and Parliament. For the first time they arranged for their guests to meet with religious leaders who engaged with the G8 agenda from a basis of faith. It was a remarkable encounter which I was asked to chair. After I made a short presentation about the theological, biblical and moral imperative to care for the earth one of the American visitors interjected “But Bishop doesn’t the Bible say that it’s all there for us to enjoy?” I replied that the Bible said that everything had come into being through and for Christ, and to suggest it was all there for us was not only to dethrone Christ from his central place but ultimately a blasphemy!”. With that the room exploded into animated discussion and there followed, to borrow a diplomatic phrase, a full and frank exchange of views.

A good example of the interface between religion and politics in America is to be found in a rare speech given by Michael Gerson to “the Ethics and Public Policy Center” in December 2004. Gerson was until last year Head of Speech Writing and Policy Adviser to President Bush. In his revealing speech about the use of religious language and images in political rhetoric Gerson identifies five categories where the President consciously uses the language of faith in his speeches.

(i) Offering comfort in grief and mourning, (ii) appealing to the historic influence of faith on America, (iii) supporting faith-based welfare reform, (iv) alluding to hymns and scripture embedded in American culture, and (v) referring to providence. However, Gerson states explicitly “The important theological principle here is to avoid identifying the purposes of an individual or a nation with the purposes of God”.

In a personal conversation with Gerson I was struck, as many people are, by his graciousness and humility. From a British perspective it seems that when the President speaks he occupies at least three different roles, in our terms akin to the Monarch, the Prime Minister and the Archbishop of Canterbury. But in spite of Gerson’s attempt to avoid the temptation of identifying the purposes of God with the interests of America the language used by the President such as “crusade” and “axis of evil” has led others outside America to infer and resent such an alignment and has fed those within her borders a diet to nourish the faith of the children of the Pilgrim Fathers. Jonathan Edwards one of the leading American evangelical divines of the 17th Century was according to his latest biographer George Marsden typical of the first settlers and their descendants who saw the migration to America as the fulfilment of Biblical prophecy. They saw themselves living out literally the promise of Jesus Christ that his followers would go “to the ends of the earth” to be his witnesses. This is deeply rooted in the American psyche and explains why appeals to providence, to destiny, to enemies, to frontiers, to faith, to evil, to prayer and to prophetic images still resonate in the American imagination.

One of the conundrums of the comparison between our two nations is that in America where church and state are formally separated, religious expression is much more intense and church attendance much higher; here in Britain where the Church of England is established religious affiliation and expression are much more muted. I shall never forget preaching about the church state relationship in an Episcopal church on the outskirts of Washington on the text “Give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.....” When I told the congregation, many of whom worked in Government, that by virtue of my office as a Bishop in the Church of England I had, by right, a seat “in the Senate” their equivalent of the House of Lords they looked at me as if I’d asked them to eat their Prayer Books!

The interface of religion and politics has many expressions. In this country there’s a noble tradition of the soul projecting political ideals onto the screen of a person’s imagination. We see it in the lives of figures such as William Wilberforce and Kier Hardie. I wrote the first draft of this lecture in the library of William Gladstone at Hawarden who unashamedly saw his premiership in terms of “mission”. For example, his ambition to bring peace to the emerald Isle was grandly framed as “my mission is to pacify Ireland”. This alliance of faith and politics has always made some people nervous especially those who want to banish all religion from public discourse. They even quote Jesus saying “My kingdom is not of this world” as if this proved their point. (By the way a better translation of this text has Jesus saying something very different: “My kingdom is not from this world”. He’s making the point to Pontius Pilate that his kingship comes

from God, not from man. In other words the authority of his kingship has a divine, not a human, source.)

People like Michael Gerson believe that erasing religion from public discourse would “remove one of the main sources of social justice in our history”. He goes on “without an appeal to justice rooted in faith, there would be no abolition movement, no civil rights movement, no pro-life movement” in America. Now Gerson is one of most articulate and influential evangelicals in America, having studied theology at Wheaton College, an evangelical foundation in Illinois and literally having put words into the mouth of the President.

When at his kind invitation I met him at the White House I was just about to ask him about whether the “appeal to justice rooted in faith” extended to the environment when the door of his windowless office opened and he was summoned into the presence of the President!

Although the relationship between American evangelicals and the environment raises the issue of the relationship of faith to politics it also begs the question as to what the Christian faith says about the environment.

Theological opinion in America is shifting. Last year 86 evangelical leaders signed a declaration about global warming and published it in the New York Times. It was headed “Climate Change : An Evangelical Call to Action”. Some of the people who added their names came under considerable pressure from politicians and from other evangelical leaders who have resisted the environmental agenda on the grounds that such a call is based on bad science and bad religion.

Two of the leading converts to the environmental cause are Richard Cizik of the National Association of Evangelicals and Jim Ball of the Evangelical Environmental Network. Both pay tribute to the work and advocacy of Sir John Houghton who served as Co-Chairman of the Scientific Assessment Working Group of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and one of the most authoritative climatologist! He served as Chief Executive of the Meteorological Office and last year was awarded the prestigious Japan Prize. In 1995 he gave His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh’s Lecture on climate change at the Royal Society. In 2004 Sir John with others organised a conference in Oxford on climate change to which religious leaders from America including Richard Cizik were invited. Richard Cizik found the journey to Oxford his Damascus Road. He was compelled by the scientific evidence.

But there was another factor that weighed heavily with Richard Cizik and his evangelical colleagues. Sir John is not only a distinguished scientist but is also a person of faith, a Christian. This is something that Sir John does not advertise but in his quiet and dignified manner is not ashamed of either. For evangelicals in America who for a variety of reasons are wary of the scientific community it enables them to hear and consider the scientific arguments with less suspicion and prejudice. But there’s yet another feature in this episode which is significant. Sir John Houghton has over the

years worked closely with Professor Sam Berry, Emeritus Professor of Genetics at University College, London and Professor Sir Ghilleen Prance, an expert on the Amazon Rainforest and formerly Director of Kew Gardens to persuade and to build a bridge between, to use Tickel's words "thought and action" on the changing climate. All three share the same Christian faith and all three stand within the evangelical tradition which is why they have had such a persuasive impact on American Evangelicals. If there is a sustained shift in opinion amongst American Evangelicals in favour of caring for the environment (or to use their phrase "Creation Care"); and, if this shift translates into changing attitudes at voter level so that there is a change of policy at National as well as State level then when history is written there should be at least a footnote on the influence of these three evangelical environmental musketeers. I have had a ringside seat at some of the discussions and witnessed the dynamics of minds and hearts changing.

In July of last year there was a seminar here at St. George's House which was convened under the title "Evangelicals and the Care of Creation". The invitees were leading American Evangelicals.

With the support of St. George's House and funding from the Tudor Trust and Tearfund the consultation addressed head-on the concerns within the American Evangelical community that the environmental agenda was based on bad religion, bad science, bad business and was therefore bad for America. The Bishop of Durham expounded the biblical basis for the care of creation, Sir John Houghton, Sir Ghilleen Prance and Professor Sam Berry set out the scientific and theological evidence and the moral case for urgent action and Lord Oxburgh, previously Chairman of Shell, examined and enthused about the enormous opportunities for investment and business. We also heard someone from Central America speak personally and passionately about deforestation and climate change, about hurricanes and floods and the devastation already experienced on America's doorstep. His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales invited guests to Highgrove to see the organic farm and gardens and to witness sound ecological principles being put into practice. This consultation was a genuine conversation and (as always happens when hearts and minds are open) opinions began to change.

Five months later several of those involved then took part in an historic consultation in South Georgia where scientific and evangelical leaders met to search for common ground and to "unite to protect creation". Given the divisions in American society between the evangelical and scientific communities over issues such as Darwinism and Intelligent Design "historic" was an understatement! The meeting was convened by the Center for Health and the Global Environment at Harvard Medical School and the National Association of Evangelicals. It resulted in "An Urgent Call to Action" published in Washington on January 17th this year. It called on "every sector of America's leadership – religious, scientific, business, political and educational" to "act now to work toward the fundamental change in values, lifestyles and public policies" and to do so "before it is too late".

You may think that all this is unremarkable. But the significance of the statement is revealed by the reaction to it from other sections of the evangelical community. On March 1st this year the Chair and the Board of the NAE were, in effect, called on to sack Richard Cizik their Vice President for government relations. Leading evangelicals from influential organisations such as Coalitions for America and American Values challenged his views on global warming saying it was shifting “the emphasis away from the great moral issues of our time”! Basically, they objected to the NAE associating the whole of the evangelical community with “a preoccupation with climate concerns” which they believe were still “a subject of heated controversy throughout the world”. They listed “the great moral issues of our time, as the sanctity of human life, the integrity of marriage and the teaching of sexual abstinence and morality to our children”. I personally subscribe to all three but sadly under the heading of “great moral issues of our time” there was no mention of global poverty, economic injustice, racism, pollution or consumerism which also undeniably threaten the quality and sanctity of human life around the world.

The positive shift in evangelical opinion among some leaders and the negative reaction within the wider evangelical community demonstrates that there is still a furious debate taking place in America.

In less than eighteen months Americans will elect a new President. Already stalls are being set out. Already politicians are signing up and making a pitch for that evangelical vote which secured the Presidency for George W. Bush but deserted the Republicans in droves at the Congressional elections in November last year.

I do not think it is an exaggeration to suggest that the redefining of priorities by evangelicals in America could have a decisive effect on the outcome of the election and the future of America and hence the future of the earth.

It is important for us to realise that America has not always been negative towards the environmental agenda. Indeed, within that great country it is at State level that there is real political will to change. In his book “Red Sky at Morning” James Gustav Speth, the Dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies shows how under both President Nixon and President Carter “the 1970’s were a wonderful decade for the American environment”. Nixon brought in the National Environmental Policy Act and Carter secured the Protection of Alaskan Lands.

It was a bi-partisan effort “with Democrats like Senator Ed Muskey joining with Republicans like Senator Howard Baker to compile an unmatched record of tough environmental legislation. Following the initiative of Theodore Roosevelt America built a remarkable system of parks, wilderness and other protected areas and under both Republican and Democrat Administrations Congress passed the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts. Furthermore, it was the United States that led in the protection and restoring of the earth’s ozone shield in the atmosphere. “However, since those days of bi-partisan achievement the last twenty years”, according to Speth, “have seen nothing but bipartisan failure”. Much of the blame he says rests with Congress.

Although Al Gore with his highly influential media campaign based on his film “An Inconvenient Truth” is now in the vanguard of the debate both in America and in the rest of the world the Clinton administration, again according to Speth, “acknowledged the problem from the outset but let eight years pass by doing little about climate change”. And, in spite of the National Academy of Sciences’ report on climate change the present Bush administration has been reluctant to pursue anything other than “a go slow approach to global climate change”..... until yesterday!

If ever there were a time when we needed to be in dialogue with our transatlantic cousins it is now. We need to understand why they have retreated from the front line of the battle to save the planet and to engage with them on some fundamental issues.

To return to Sir Crispin Tickell’s comment about “the bridge between thought and action” we need to understand the political and religious ideas that shape the thinking and in this case lead to inaction, at least at the Federal level. The importance of being in dialogue with America was highlighted at the beginning of the year when His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales was invited to receive the Global Environmental Award in New York. Perhaps I could add a personal note here and say how depressing it was to see such a negative reaction in the British media. Of all those qualified to engage in the debate with America there are few who have the credentials to match those of the Prince of Wales. Carping comments about carbon emissions from his flight to America revealed the lack of understanding both in the media and amongst some environmentalists about how we will make progress together about the future of the earth only through talking with one another face to face. If that takes a plane journey it is a relatively small price to pay for a much greater prize. Indeed, to get things in proportion we should know that in the next 24 hours, deforestation will release as much CO₂ into the atmosphere as eight million people flying from London to New York!

The conversation with America cannot ignore the conservatives in both religion and politics. Nor can it ignore the real fears that Americans have about the future of their economy. Their anxiety is that if they factor in the true environmental costs into their products they will price themselves out of the world market and export not their products but their jobs and factories to India and China. Americans need to see the huge entrepreneurial opportunities that lie in renewable energy technology and biomimetic industries where industrial processes are based on natural processes.

Adam Smith the 18th Century Philosopher and Economist who continues to exercise great influence and has recently shown his continuing clout by elbowing Edward Elgar off the back of the £20 note has exercised great influence over politicians in our own time from Margaret Thatcher to Gordon Brown. In his “Wealth of Nations” he wrote “Capitals are increased by parsimony, and diminished by prodigality and misconduct”. Although words like “environment”, “sustainability” and “ecology” would have been a foreign language to Adam Smith and are not to be found in the text of his writings nevertheless his observations and philosophy are surprisingly relevant to our modern predicament.

Smith warns against the prodigal consumption of capital and advocates the frugal conservation of capital as the secret of a successful economy. He, of course, as sceptics of big Government will know only too well saw Kings and Ministers and “the profusion of government” as “the greatest spendthrifts in the society” and the biggest drain on capital.

Here is one of the key principles of the Wealth of Nations : the priority of frugality and parsimony over profligacy and prodigality. There is of course a major contrast between our world and that of Adam Smith. There is no sense in the Wealth of Nations (at least, I could not see it) that the land is anything but a limitless larder, a sure storehouse of riches.

This is a far cry from the contemporary world in which for the sixth time in seven years we will eat more than we grow in that year. What we have come to see two hundred and fifty years after Adam Smith is that the earth is not a limitless larder, and that we are soon reaching a crisis with predictions that by the year 2050 we would need at least two planets to sustain current levels of consumption if all the world were to live to our current standards.

Had Adam Smith lived today he would undoubtedly have applied his principles of parsimony to our present context. As it is his warnings about profligacy and prodigality are relevant to present debates about carbon emissions and climate change.

Interestingly, it was Lady Thatcher who still holds such sway over Conservatives in America who famously summed up our responsibility for the earth by stating unequivocally, “All we have is a life tenancy with a full-repairing lease”. In a personal conversation John Gummer told me (with permission to pass it on) that he wrote that speech for her and that in conversation with him indicated that she and he were at that time alone in the Cabinet in believing that science showed that changes were taking place in the climate. Furthermore, it was in a speech to the United Nations in 1989 when she said “We are the Lord’s creatures, the trustees of life in this planet, charged with preserving life itself”.

Margaret Thatcher’s appeal to the truth that we are God’s creatures clearly show her basing political thought and action upon religious convictions. Whatever we may think of that there are two points to be drawn from it.

Firstly, here is the use of religious imagery and language in political rhetoric similar to that scripted by Michael Gerson and secondly, here is one of the leading Conservative politicians of the last century taking a line different from that being pursued by the present Conservative administration in America in relation to the future of the earth.

Not only does there need to be engagement politically there has also to be a theological debate because of the influence of religion in the political sphere. I have already indicated the influence of evangelical thinking especially on the right of the political spectrum. The other sphere of religious influence is that of the Roman Catholic Church.

Although around the world there are many Roman Catholic priests and communities in the forefront of environmental campaigns, for example, in South America and in the Philippines, there has yet to emerge from the Vatican a major statement that would have influence around the world and especially in America.

Although, there are some hopeful signs. Firstly, in November of last year Pope Benedict XVI met with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I and issued a joint statement that suggests that new thinking is emerging. I quote from it, “at present, in the face of the great threats to the natural environment, we want to express our concern at the negative consequences for humanity and for the whole of creation which can result from economic and technological progress that does not know its limits. As religious leaders, we consider it one of our duties to encourage and to support all efforts made to protect God’s creation, and to bequeath to future generations a world in which they will be able to live”.

This echoes that African proverb “We have borrowed the present from our children”. Furthermore, at the end of April I was invited by the Pontifical Council on Justice and Peace to participate in a conference on Climate Change and Development in the Vatican and to give a presentation on climate change and the ecumenical response. To my surprise there was a disproportionate number of climate change skeptics present who insisted on constantly challenging the scientific evidence, questioning both the IPCC Report and the Stern Review.

I have to say, not being a scientist I take refuge in George’s Monbiot’s four questions.

“If you reject this explanation for planetary warming, you should ask yourself the following questions:

1. Does the atmosphere contain carbon dioxide?
2. Does atmospheric carbon dioxide raise the average global temperature?
3. Will this influence be enhanced by the addition of more carbon dioxide?
4. Have human activities led to a net increase of carbon dioxide?

If you are able to answer “no” to any one of them, you should put yourself forward for a Nobel Prize. You will have turned science on its head”.

The Vatican Conference was, however, a significant event and should it ever lead one day to a Papal encyclical on this subject this would be a major step towards changing hearts and minds in America and around the world.

In my view there are briefly two major theological points that need to be made in the debate. Firstly, the concept of human dominion over the earth needs to be qualified. It is true that in Genesis Chapter 1 v28 humanity is given dominion over the earth. What many people overlook is that this dominion is immediately qualified in the following chapter where Adam is set by God in the Garden to “till it and keep it”. This is an

inadequate translation for the words properly mean “to serve and preserve” the earth. In other words, the relationship between humanity and the earth is to be characterized by servant lordship. The dominion spoken of in Genesis does not mean that humanity is apart from creation but a part of it. The only other time this phrase “to till and to keep” or “to serve and preserve” is used is in the Book of Numbers where it describes the ministry of the priests in the temple. Just as the Levites were to serve God by ministering within the temple so Adam is called to serve God by caring for the earth in the garden. The Bible gives nobody a mandate of domination to rape the earth.

Secondly, there is clearly a link between eschatology and ecology and by that I mean a link between what we think will happen to the earth and how we now treat the earth. Some people subscribe to what is in effect a theology of obliteration. This means that if you believe that one day the world will end in some great cosmic combustion then you need not worry about what happens to it now. It means that you can concentrate on securing your personal salvation in another world while sitting loose to your obligations in this one. It means that there are even some people who actually believe that we should hasten the day of such an obliteration.

I do not have the space here to expound the arguments. However, although the Bible talks about the future in language of both continuity and discontinuity the overall sense of scripture is that God is at work sustaining, renewing and transforming his creation rather than destroying it. The Lord’s Prayer has at its heart the petition for “God’s will to be done on earth as it is done in heaven”. This is a prayer for the earthing of heaven. The biblical vision of the future is one in which heaven and earth are fused together.

Just as Christianity provides a range of world views that influence political judgements so too does Islam. I have no authority to speak about another faith but I note from my own studies that just as in Christianity there are theological motifs that provide a moral basis for an environmental ethic so too in Islam. In a recent paper on Islam and climate change: “Perspectives and Engagement” Dr. Muzammal Hussain has drawn up an Islamic environmental ethic in which he establishes the principles of vice regency, balance, proportionality and justice. In so doing he shows that there is much common ground between Christianity and Islam. Yet just as within Christianity there are those who subscribe to a theology of obliteration so too there are Muslims who contemplate the future involving the destruction of the earth. If these, if I can use this word, “obliterationists” gain the ascendancy in Christianity and in Islam and dominate their own cultures with a political world view based on their theological conviction then we are facing an eschatological scenario of the bleakest proportions. It does not require much imagination as to what might happen to us all if the world is held captive to a struggle between two religiously based political ideologies that are predicated on the ultimate destruction of the earth. It is a sobering thought. This would be a very pessimistic note on which to end! And I do not intend to.

In an article in the National Geographic Magazine Bill McKibben called for a more positive outlook and for a “convivial environmentalism”. Too much talk of the earth is shrouded in gloom and doom. People of faith, and especially Christian faith, should

delight in the earth which the Lord made and declared good. The case for sustaining it is based on good religion and science and good business. To care for it is good, good for Europe and America, good for the poor and good for the world.

Next week the G8 summit will meet under the leadership of German Chancellor Angela Merkel who is determined to take forward the climate change agenda.

Yesterday the American President George Bush surprised many of his critics by announcing a new framework on Global Gas Emissions within a timetable over the next 18 months. Our Prime Minister in the final days of his own premiership declared this to be “a significant step forward”. He made his statement most appropriately in Africa for there is no point at all in helping that continent with aid, trade and debt relief with the one hand if with the other we change the climate and ruin their harvests.

It is intriguing to ask what has stirred the President to take this action and to overcome the fears that the environment and the climate change agenda are bad science, bad religion, bad business and bad for America.

I suspect (although we may need to wait for his biography to be sure) that behind closed doors when all the advisers – political, economic, scientific – had had their say the President will have taken counsel from those whose view of the world is also shaped by faith. If such faith leads to action that saves the planet then it will indeed be a blessing that not only the rich but the poor and the meek will indeed inherit the earth.