

SIR JOHN HOUGHTON

Christians and the Environment: Our Opportunities and Responsibilities

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Our current environmental crisis

The year 1995 marked the 1900th Anniversary of the writing of the book of Revelation by John the Theologian. Just over a year ago, I was privileged to join a symposium to celebrate the Anniversary, the subject of which was Revelation and the Environment—a symposium sponsored by His All Holiness, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of the Greek Orthodox Church and by His Royal Highness Prince Philip in his capacity as President of the World Wildlife Fund. Of particular concern at the symposium was the appalling legacy of environmental damage from the old Soviet Union.

A wide variety of people attended the symposium, scientists, theologians, politicians, environmentalists and people from the media. Amongst us were those from many different religious backgrounds and beliefs. We started with a day of presentations on the book of Revelation. I imagined that after that we would get down to the science and the politics of environmental problems without much reference to the spiritual side of things, but it was interesting to see how spiritual issues kept coming up; in fact in some ways their importance was seen to be such that they dominated our discussion throughout.

The book of the Revelation may not at first sight be seen as an environmental textbook. However, the visions it presents contain some important insights into our Christian perspective on the environment. They tell of large scale environmental damage. As the seals were opened in chapter 6 and as the trumpets sounded after the opening of the seventh seal in chapter 8, devastation over parts of the Earth was delivered through war, disease and through environmental degradation. But degradation and devastation are only temporary; the book of the Revelation also looks to a future with a new transformed Earth fit for transformed people to dwell in.

The Christian perspective on the environment, however, is not just to be found in the Revelation—the last book of the Bible. As I hope to show in this lecture it is a perspective which is developed throughout the Bible from the very first chapter onwards. It is also a perspective with strong and important messages for us as individuals and for the church as a whole.

Throughout human history, some have looked after their environment with

great care, making sure that they could pass their land on to their children and grandchildren in even better shape than they received it. Others have exploited their environment for their own ends without thinking of the future consequences, or have been polluters of the air, the land or the seas, doing damage which in some cases has been irreversible. We are only too aware in our own country of the spoil heaps and contaminated land and rivers which remain a legacy of the industrial revolution.

Such pollution has on the whole been on a relatively local scale. During the last few decades, however, as human population has sharply increased, we are now faced as a human race with environmental degradation on an enormous scale and with pollution that is *global* in its extent. For instance, in tropical countries, forests are being cut down at a rate such that an area of forest equivalent to that of the British Isles is being lost every year. With the loss of forest goes loss of soil and an enormous loss of biodiversity. Then there are the global impacts of climate change caused by global warming because of the rapidly increasing emissions of carbon dioxide and other so-called 'greenhouse gases' into the atmosphere. Because these gases spread around the whole atmosphere and remain there for a long time, the carbon dioxide that I emit will affect the climate and possibly the livelihood of peoples living far away, who may be particularly vulnerable to such change. If no action is taken to slow down these emissions, the climate is expected to change more rapidly than at any time during the last 10,000 years. There will be a rise of sea level, not by an enormous amount, perhaps up to a metre over a hundred years, but enough to have devastating effects on people living in low lying parts of countries like Bangladesh, Egypt and China and many low lying island states. Further there are likely to be changes in rainfall patterns bringing more frequent droughts to some areas and more frequent floods to others. Since droughts and floods are by far the most devastating of natural disasters, climate change which increases their frequency must be viewed very seriously indeed.

Environmental problems are, however, not the only problems of global extent facing the world. There are many others—poverty, the availability and use of resources, security and population growth. All in their turn influence the environment; they all need to be taken together. Christians and the church need to be addressing them all, not shying away from them because of their difficulty. In particular, if population growth could be much reduced, the other problems would be of lesser magnitude; the church to its shame has tended to put that problem on one side.

Why look after the Earth?

But does it matter that we exploit or pollute our environment? Why should we look after the Earth? There are those who feel, for instance, that we have no overriding responsibility to look after future generations; they will be clever enough to look after themselves. I remember in 1990, after giving a briefing on climate change to Mrs Thatcher and her cabinet, I walked out of Downing

Street with a cabinet minister who said that it was not a problem that need concern him—it was too far into the future. However, such an attitude ignores a widespread feeling that we do have responsibilities beyond our own immediate needs, responsibilities to future generations of human beings and to other living creatures and life-forms on the planet.

Let me mention two important bases for our view of the Earth and why we should look after it.

First, the *unity* of creation. Here we can turn to the insights of modern science which contain a strong message that we are part of the larger world of all living things. We are becoming increasingly aware of our dependence on the rest of nature and of the interdependencies which exist between different forms of life, between living systems and the physical and chemical environment which surrounds life on the Earth—and indeed between ourselves and the rest of the universe. James Lovelock's hypothesis called Gaia well illustrates this point.

This message of the unity of creation is one which has tended to be emphasised by eastern religions rather than by Christians—although I believe it is strongly there at the basis of the Christian faith, for reasons that will become very clear as I move through this lecture.

A second important basis is that it is a *good* creation. The creation story right at the beginning of the Bible states this seven times—'God saw all that he had made and it was very good'. The Old Testament continually illustrates this theme particularly in its poetry set very much in the context of the agricultural economy of the people of Israel and the land they were given. In the gospels we find Jesus taking many of his parables from the natural world which he clearly enjoyed and Paul in his epistles makes some very majestic statements about the creation.

The goodness of creation is also reflected in its diversity—there are estimated to be several million species of living things on the Earth of which possibly less than ten per cent have been identified. I have already mentioned the great concern about the rapid destruction of species which is going on particularly through the destruction of tropical forests. It is also a good creation because of its beauty and we humans and other creatures can find enormous enjoyment in it.

Not all religions or ideologies assert the goodness of creation. Many consider that matter is either essentially evil, illusory or unimportant. Some Christians in emphasising the spiritual forget how central is the theme of creation—a good creation—to the Christian message. Some would go further and argue that the material creation is unimportant when it comes to faith—it is only the spiritual that matters. Perhaps for this reason, Christians have not always been supporters of 'green' movements or in the forefront of those who advocate environmentally responsible policies.

My main purpose in this lecture is to demonstrate the inadequacy of such an attitude. Concern for God's creation is right at the heart of the Christian message.

Stewardship of the Earth: A Christian view

The relationship between humans and the Earth which is often presented is one of *stewardship*. We are on the Earth as its stewards. But stewards on behalf of whom? Some environmentalists would see no need to answer the question specifically, others might say we are stewards on behalf of future generations or on behalf of a generalised humanity. A religious person would want to be more specific and say that we are stewards on behalf of God.

Let me mention here the debate which is going on about the place of humans in this environmental picture. Should they be at the centre of it—with everything else and other living beings related to that human centre—in other words an anthropocentric view? Or should higher prominence be given to the non-human creation in our scheme of things—in other words a more ecocentric view? How far can we, and should we, give value and importance to the non-human creation—and in what way? Some feel that the model of humans as stewards of creation gives humans too central a position—at the expense of other living beings and systems. I do not wish to pursue that debate here except to say two things.

Firstly, the basic points I have already made regarding the unity and the goodness of creation both emphasise the value of all creation in its own right and not just as related to humans—that, I believe, is very much a Biblical view.

Secondly, as humans made in the image of God we not only have relationships but responsibilities—it may be that we are unique in the scheme of living things in possessing responsibilities. That we are *stewards* of creation brings in fundamentally the notion of responsibility, first to God as the one whose stewards we are—we are to look after the Earth, not as we please, but as God wants it looked after—and secondly we have responsibility to the rest of creation as ones who stand in the place of God.

I want now to explore further a number of important insights which come from a particularly Christian view.

The Earth—a garden

A helpful picture of stewardship is found in the Judaeo-Christian tradition in the story of creation in the early chapters of the Bible. God's purpose, we are told, in making people was to care for the rest of creation—the idea of the human stewardship of creation is a very old one! Adam and Eve were placed in a garden, the garden of Eden, 'to work it and take care of it'. We are presented with a picture of our first parents as 'gardeners' of the Earth; the Earth as God's garden and us as gardeners. What does our work as 'gardeners' imply? I want to suggest four things.

- A garden provides food and water and other materials to sustain life in all its forms and human industry. It is interesting that the Genesis story not only mentions food and water but also mineral resources. Regarding part of

the garden we are told 'the gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there'. The Earth provides resources for us humans to use as we need them.

- A garden is to be maintained as a place of beauty. The trees in the garden of Eden were 'pleasing to the eye'. We are to live in harmony with the rest of creation and to appreciate the value of all parts of creation. A garden is a place where care is taken to preserve the diversity of species, in particular those that are most vulnerable. Millions of people each year visit gardens which have been specially designed to show off the incredible variety and beauty of nature. Gardens are meant to be enjoyed.
- A garden is a place where humans can be creative. Its resources provide for great potential. The variety of species and landscape can be employed to increase the garden's beauty and its productivity. Humans have learnt to generate new plant varieties in abundance and to use their scientific and technical knowledge coupled with the enormous variety of the Earth's resources to create new possibilities for life and its enjoyment. However, we are also only too aware that human creativity has potential for evil use as well as for good use.
- A garden is to be kept so as to be of benefit to future generations. I shall always remember Gordon Dobson who was my predecessor as Professor of Atmospheric Physics at Oxford and who carried out the classic scientific work on atmospheric ozone (atmospheric ozone is measured in Dobson units!). He had a garden in which were many fruit trees. When he was 85, a year or so before he died, I remember finding him hard at work in his garden replacing a number of not so old apple trees. Not bad for 85, I thought. In doing so he clearly had future generations in mind!

How well do we humans match up to ourselves as gardeners caring for the earth? Not very well, it must be said; we are more often exploiters and spoilers rather than gardeners. But the Genesis chapters, as do other parts of scripture, insist that human rule over creation is to be exercised under God, the ultimate ruler of creation, with the sort of care exemplified by this picture of humans as 'gardeners'.

Much talk but little action

Many of these principles of stewardship of the 'garden' are included at least implicitly in much that is written about the environment. The Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 was the biggest international conference ever held with upwards of 25,000 attendees. Millions of words resulted from its conventions and resolutions. We are not short of statements of ideals or of desirable action. What seem generally lacking are the capability and resolve to carry them out. Lots of talk but little action.

We are only too aware of the strong temptations we experience—both personally and nationally—to use the world's resources to gratify our own selfishness and greed. This is not a new problem, in fact a very old one. In the

Genesis story of the garden, we are introduced to human sin with its tragic consequences; humans disobeyed God and did not want Him around any more. That broken relationship with God led on to broken relationships elsewhere too. The disasters we find everywhere in the environment speak eloquently of the consequences of that broken relationship.

But when thinking of the sin and evil which results from a broken relationship with God, Christians generally think of sin against people not against the environment. I remember John the Metropolitan of Pergamon at the symposium on 'Revelation and the Environment' which I mentioned earlier. He was the chairman of the symposium's scientific committee and he kept emphasising that Christians should consider pollution of the environment—or lack of care for the environment—as a sin. That would be in line with the clear mandate of care for the Earth which was given to humans by God right at the beginning of things. To fail in that task is not only a sin against nature but a sin against God. His message struck a strong chord with the symposium, both with Christians and non-Christians.

Out of the symposium came a short statement of 7 principles. The first is entitled 'A new sense of sin which extends beyond what has traditionally been considered wrong'. It goes on to explain that this new category of sin should include activities that lead to 'species extinction, reduction in genetic diversity, pollution of the water, land and air, habitat destruction and disruption of sustainable life styles'. I think also that this new sense of sin should include the sin of too much talk and too little action!

Incarnation and Resurrection: a future for the material

You may well ask the question, has not human sin ruined it all? In trying to look after the Earth are we not facing a losing battle? Can we be sure that the battle will be won? Is there a future for the Earth? Some Christians think there is not. Picking on particular verses in the Bible which seem to suggest there is no future for the Earth Christians have often argued against getting involved—it is only salvation from spiritual evil that matters, they say. Arguing that way, however, is to ignore the fact that the central themes of Christian theology—those of creation and salvation are very closely tied together. They are joined through the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus.

So, although there is bad news, there is also good news. Human failure and sin have not put an end to God's purposes for human beings. When in Jesus, God became human in the incarnation, he demonstrated to the fullest extent possible God's commitment to the material world. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury sixty years ago wrote:

'Christianity is the most materialistic of all great religions. The others hope to achieve spiritual reality by ignoring matter—calling it illusion (*maya*) or saying that it does not exist . . . Christianity, based as it is on the Incarnation, regards matter as destined to be the vehicle and instrument of spirit, and spirit

as fully actual so far as it controls and directs matter . . . Its . . . most central saying is, "The Word was made flesh" . . . By the very nature of its central doctrine Christianity is committed to a belief . . . in the reality of matter and its place in the divine scheme.' In other words the incarnation demonstrates God's interest in and concern for the material.

It is the resurrection of Jesus which is the key to our hope for the future. When Jesus rose from the dead he did not leave the material created order; rather he demonstrated his power of transformation over that order. Professor Oliver O'Donovan of Oxford has written, 'It might have been possible . . . before Christ rose from the dead, for someone to wonder whether creation was a lost cause. If the creature constantly acted to uncreate itself, and with itself to uncreate the rest of creation, did not this mean that God's handiwork was flawed beyond hope of repair? . . . Before God raised Jesus from the dead, the hope that we call "gnostic", the hope of redemption *from* creation rather than *for the redemption* of creation, might have appeared to be the only possible hope.'

But we are not gnostics. This theme of the redemption of creation is taken up by St Paul in a remarkable passage in Romans chapter 8. 'Creation is waiting' he says 'with eager expectation. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God'.

Emphasis on resurrection and redemption continues in the book of Revelation where we are presented with the marvellous vision John had of new heavens and new Earth—a redeemed Earth and redeemed people to live on it!

So there *is* a future for the Earth! We need a theology of creation which includes as central themes both Incarnation and Resurrection—rocks on which a theology of creation has to be built. Jesus Christ is central to all our thinking about creation—and creation is part of the future that he came to establish.

Partnership with God

I come back to the practical problems of stewardship of the Earth, which at any level is a formidable task. It is beset by problems of human selfishness and greed which lead to overexploitation of the Earth's resources; also by the problem of human impotence—we know what to do, but lack the will to do it. We may often despair that it is beyond the capability of the human race to tackle it adequately. It is, in fact, a spiritual problem.

But this is just where the Christian doctrine of salvation is particularly relevant—it is not only about salvation *from*, it is also about salvation *for*. An important, in fact essential, religious message is that we do not have to carry the responsibility of looking after the Earth on our own. Our partner is no other than God Himself.

Let me go back to the Genesis stories of the garden, which contain a beautiful

description of this partnership when they speak of God 'walking in the garden in the cool of the day'. What did God and Adam and Eve talk about on those evening walks, I wonder? They would, I am sure, have talked about the garden and how humans were getting on finding out about it and caring for it.

In the Christian message the material and the spiritual are closely linked together. Jesus once said to his disciples, 'Without me you can do nothing'. This is usually interpreted as relating particularly to the spiritual sphere and to religious activity but I believe that Jesus meant it to be a much more comprehensive statement applying to everything that we do. After all, taking care of the Earth is also very much God's work.

Further, Jesus explained to his disciples that he was not calling them servants but friends. Servants are given instructions without explanation; as friends we are brought into the confidence of our Lord. We are not given prescriptions of precise action but are expected to use the gifts we have been given to carry out our tasks in a genuine partnership. And the incredible thing is that it is a partnership with God the Creator himself.

In facing environmental problems therefore, we are called to exercise stewardship in as thorough a manner as possible, looking to God for the ability to carry out our responsibilities. For any situation there are bound to be limitations to our knowledge and our ability to control. What we are invited to do is to go into the situation in partnership with God, knowing that he can take care of those things which we cannot. A clear understanding of the responsibilities we have been given coupled with trust in God's presence and trustworthiness is the mixture that makes stewardship both exciting and challenging.

Science, Technology and Humility

I want finally to address the role of science and technology in our work of looking after the Earth.

I believe that the pursuit of scientific knowledge and the application of technology are an essential part of our stewardship. Let me mention here something very positive about the scientific enterprise, namely the remarkable degree of cooperation that occurs within the scientific community. I have been privileged to chair or co-chair the Scientific Assessments on Climate Change for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Nearly all the scientists who have done significant research into climate science anywhere in the world have joined in this activity; our reports prepared by a very wide community of scientists have achieved unanimous agreement over the content of the reports and over the way they are presented. It is an area of science where there is much uncertainty—the scientific consensus which has been achieved is that of distinguishing between those parts of the science about which there is broad agreement and those parts where there is a lot of uncertainty—something that policymakers very much want to know.

In doing their work, the scientists have realised that they are dealing with

facts that they discover not that they invent; they have also realised that the facts are relevant to an issue of major human concern and that they have a responsibility to convey their information to the wider human community, especially to those who are concerned with policy. It has been the discipline of science, which includes an attitude of 'humility before the facts' as Thomas Huxley called it a century ago, that has provided the strong unifying factor in this human enterprise.

Another great unifying factor has been the basic honesty of the scientific enterprise. Our responsibility as scientists is to tell it as it is, not hyped up or damped down. One of the most important reasons why the IPCC reports have had such political influence is that they are honest reports—the truth has its own power to convince. Exaggerate the message for the sake of effect—and it is immediately weakened enormously because it is no longer the truth.

But science and technology also present to us a large temptation. They offer us the possibility of taking improper control, of being gods ourselves—just the temptation offered to the first humans in the garden in the Genesis story. Some have argued, for instance, that the dominion over creation given to Adam in the first chapter of Genesis provides a mandate for exploiting and using the Earth's resources for their own particular selfish benefit. We can see only too well the results of the use of technology to further uncontrolled and unbalanced exploitation. And all of us who work in the environment know only too well how often our attempts to solve one environmental problem create other problems we had failed to identify—the maintenance of environmental balance is vitally important.

Uncontrolled exploitation was not the mandate given to humans in looking after the Earth. We are to use our scientific knowledge and technology to the full, but in a sensitive and balanced way realising that they must contribute to the well being of all human communities and also to that of the other living systems with whom we share our Earth. We need a large measure of humility not only before the facts of science, but also in our attitudes to other humans and other living systems. Humility to an outstanding degree was shown by Jesus, the Son of God, who humbled himself and took on human form, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross to accomplish his great work of salvation. The same sort of humility is what we need—although many of us do not find it the easiest of the Christian qualities to manifest in what we do.

A final challenge

Finally I wish to sum up what I have tried to say. The conclusions I have drawn are:

- 1) The world is facing environmental crises of unparalleled magnitude, including some on a global scale.
- 2) Looking after the Earth is a God-given responsibility. Not to look after the Earth is a sin.
- 3) Christians need to re-emphasise that the doctrines of creation,

incarnation and resurrection belong together. The spiritual is not to be seen as separate from the material; they belong together. A thoroughgoing theology of the environment needs to be developed.

- 4) Our stewardship of the Earth, as Christians, is to be pursued in dependence on and partnership with God.
- 5) The application of science and technology is an important component of stewardship. Humility is an essential ingredient in the pursuit and the application of science—and in the exercise of stewardship.
- 6) All of this provides an enormous opportunity for the church. The church has too much ignored the Earth and the environment, and neglected the importance of creation and its place in the overall Christian message. If the church were able to introduce these themes in a relevant way, it could come over powerfully to modern people obsessed with the material. It could help to demonstrate the relevance of the Christian faith to people who otherwise see no point in it and see no relevance in the spiritual message we want to bring. A strong challenge, therefore, facing today's church is to include environmental concerns as part of its mission.

What actions can the individual and the church take?

In addition to some real change of attitudes, what particular actions can we all take and can churches take? Sir Ghillean Prance, Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, in his recent book 'The Earth under Threat—a Christian perspective' lists a number of things—many others have provided similar lists (for instance the organisation Christian Ecology Link).

First there is our individual life style; we could be less wasteful, recycle as much as possible, reduce our use of energy and other resources by, for instance, making sure that our homes are well insulated, that we drive efficient cars etc.

Then there is our church lifestyle. Churches own buildings and often land; we can make sure that they are looked after in an environmentally responsible way. Churches can also use their education and teaching programmes to teach about Christian attitudes to the environment.

Then there is the leadership role of the Church in society. Too often the church speaks with an unclear voice. But, following Jesus who was both a realist and a man of action, the church has great potential strengths. Over the years, the church has exhibited these strengths—it has faced up to things as they are, seen evil and sin for what it is, called it by its real names. Too many issues are fudged in our modern world; as Christians we should be realists telling things as they are, putting over environmental issues in a truthful way, neither over exaggerated nor underplayed. And we should also be people of action, trying to help society through from the stage of knowing what should be done and talking a lot about it to the stage of actually doing it. After all we believe that we have been given a mainspring of action through God's Holy Spirit.

Let me conclude by returning to the book of Revelation, not to John's great

vision, but to the more earthy parts earlier in the book. I want to focus on a passage which talks of partnership with God. John wrote letters to the Christian churches of the time with messages which he had received from the risen Christ. He had some highly scathing messages for the church at Laodicea; they were so lukewarm he was about to spit them out of his mouth. But the letter ends with a particularly beautiful picture of partnership with the living Jesus Christ. The Laodicean Christians are keeping Jesus outside their lives. He is pictured as knocking at the door. 'Here I am' he says, 'I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will go in and eat with him and he with me.' It is a picture often used in evangelistic appeals to non Christians. But in fact it was addressed to Christians. We are just as lukewarm as the Laodiceans; in looking after the Earth perhaps much more so. The living Lord Jesus wants us to be genuine partners in his work in the world and he wants to open the door of our lives and discuss what he needs from us over a meal, as it were. What a fantastic invitation! If, as a Christian church we really took that dinner invitation seriously, what an enormous impact we could have on the future of the Earth we are supposed to be looking after.

Further Reading

- Al Gore, 'Earth in the Balance', Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992
Ron Elsdon, 'Greenhouse Theology', Monarch Press 1992
Lawrence Osborn, 'Guardians of Creation', Apollos Books 1993
Colin Russell, 'The Earth, Humanity and God', UCL Press, 1994
John Houghton, 'Global Warming: the complete briefing', Lion Publications 1994
John Houghton, 'The search for God: can science help?' Lion Publications 1995
Ghillean Prance 'The Earth under threat: a Christian perspective', Wild Goose Publications 1996

Sir John Houghton CBE FRS is chairman of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, co-chairman of the Scientific Assessment Working Group of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change and a member of the UK Government Panel on Sustainable Development.
