

Foreword to *Cherishing the Earth*, an edited collection of articles on climate change theology due in April 2023 from the UK Unitarians

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Foreword

Alastair McIntosh

One sentence from this book lingers longest with me: the last sentence in the last chapter. Sophie Emm, one of the Unitarian children who have contributed to the volume, expresses a concern that could speak for so many of us. She suggests that even if we do switch to electric vehicles, and even if we otherwise edge towards greener ways of living, so much will have been lost. You can't bring back what's gone extinct. You can't unmelt the glaciers, she says. And in a tone of understated, searing honesty, she leaves us with the stark question: *"What if it's already too late?"*

That question encapsulates the importance of this book. We can start by acknowledging that, for some species, it is indeed already too late. For the two thousand people who died and the two million made homeless in the Pakistan floods of 2022, it is already too late. Elsewhere, for those driven off their lands by drought, or coastal peoples watching theirs yield slowly to the waves, it is already too late.

Some will ask: "What use is spirituality now? What is the practical use of a book like this?" My short answer is: because we need to reconsider how to live. My longer answer is more complicated. Prophetic work (and many of the chapters in this book are prophetic) involves a relationship with time, especially when we are working towards a stepped vision for the future, and practical steps in public policy along the way.

In any highly charged political field, powerful forces will try to capture our attention, energy, and resources in directions that suit their interests. Most of us will be very well aware of the kinds of forces that have driven climate-change ‘denialism’, claiming that it’s not happening, or, if it is, it’s not caused by the emissions of greenhouse gases for which human impact is responsible. Less expected are the forces of ‘alarmism’ on the other side, which exaggerate the science either as a public expression of their own anxiety, or in the hope of boosting political action. One problem with such ‘alarmism’ is that it edges over into ‘doomism’, which in turn risks encouraging recklessness, wasted energies, or despair. Both polarities misdirect our energies.

I name these tendencies because exponents of both positions attend my talks, and it is the alarmism that most bothers me, because that feels like friendly fire. I mean forecasts made by people who may set themselves up as experts, but who lack a reputation in the science that is worth not losing. I mean climate-futures prophecies such as six or seven billion people dead by the end of this century, the ‘inevitable’ near-term social collapse of many or most countries in the world by 2028, or even human extinction by 2026. At least the retired American ecology professor who pumps the latter date to his cult-like following has now granted an extension. As he blogged last year: *“I stand firm on my prediction that there will be no humans on Earth in 2030.”*¹

For the most part, we only know what we think we know about climate science because of the climate science. If we claim to know better, if we either ignore the consensus of expert science or exaggerate it, we had better have credentials that are credible, otherwise we are deluded and deluding at best, and charlatans at worst. Religious studies can offer important insights here. Such studies understand, better than most academic fields, the psychology of end-of-world millenarianism. Moreover, they understand the vacuum in authentic spirituality that such narratives can be sucked into.

For my part, I give credence to the work of the scientists who serve, in their many thousands, such organisations as the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Critics accuse them of being conservative and compromised. But in science, if you play a compromised game for long, you get found out. The scientists whom I respect point out that the mainstream science is already alarming enough to require no added alarmism to hammer on the door of politicians, even if they are amenable to listening. As summarised in one of the most recent IPCC reports at the time of writing:²

It is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land ... The scale of recent changes across the climate system as a whole ... are

¹ Guy McPherson, ‘Transcript: Why Are We Here?’, *Nature Bats Last* blog, 20 February 2021, <https://guymcpherson.com/transcript-why-are-we-here/>.

² https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGI_Headline_Statements.pdf

unprecedented. Human-induced climate change is already affecting many weather and climate extremes in every region across the globe.

If we follow the siren voices of denialism, then we do nothing. That may protect us from the imposition of carbon taxes and immediate lifestyle changes, but it sends the planet to hell in a handcart. But equally, if we follow the voices of alarmism, we risk betraying public trust in science if our exaggerations get found out. As with the IPCC's famous error in 2007, where bad referencing caused it to predict the demise of Himalayan glaciers by 2035, such slippages of rigour provide an endlessly recycled stream of bullets which the climate-change deniers then deploy to discredit science itself.

Moreover, if all we do is drive panic, without a vision that can stack up in a democracy to suggest what an alternative future could look like, then our agitation is but music to the ears of reactionary politicians who raise the spectre of climate refugees in order to clamp down on asylum seekers, and music also to the ears of developers, investors, and lobby groups pushing for geo-engineering as an alternative to cutting emissions. Notions such as dimming the amount of sunlight reaching Earth, while superficially attractive, would have unpredictable weather effects and consequent political effects; they would do nothing to slow down ocean acidification caused by the relentless build-up of CO₂; and they would provide cover for consumerist business-as-usual carbon emissions, leaving posterity to deal with 'termination shock' if such hi-tech interventions were ever ceased, or otherwise knocked out, causing abrupt planetary re-heating to unprecedented levels.

In science, there is no substitute for 'tell the truth', and that is why responsible bodies such as the IPCC make careful and defined use of such everyday language as 'high agreement', 'limited evidence', or 'about as likely as not'. For example, the latter implies a probability ranging from 33 per cent to 66 per cent, while acknowledging that such qualitative language has 'fuzzy' boundaries.³

We need to act now, but unless such action intends to bypass democracy, we need to carry others with us. I hear those who cry, "But that'll leave it too late!", to whom I am forced to reply: "Well, I hope you'll do authoritarianism better than whoever else will take the lead if you let that one out of the bag." And to say so feels awful, because I have seen the looks of trapped panic on the faces of faithful, passionate activists. On the one hand, the reality that climate change is closing in on us. On the other hand: what more can we be doing to head it off within the disciplined approach of democratic politics? Even if they choose to lead, politicians can only lead so far ahead of the electorate and still get voted back in. Here, then, is our stark conundrum. If we are alive to what gives life, where do we turn? For haste,

³ IPCC, *Guidance Note on ... Consistent Treatment of Uncertainties*, Geneva, 2010, https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2017/08/AR5_Uncertainty_Guidance_Note.pdf.

indeed, “is of the devil”. But what of God? What of those mills that turn so slowly? Have they anything to offer but the panacea phantasms of opium?

Leading climate scientists insist that there is still time to save the Earth, or much of what we love, but that requires action not just on the short temporal horizon, but also with medium- and long-term thinking. If we focus only on what can be done immediately, we foreclose on the future. There are pathways to a sane future, and in my view these need to be better understood. One set of such pathways are the technical-emissions scenarios laid out by the IPCC in its Special Report in 2018 on limiting global warming to around 1.5°C. This massive study is prefaced with a quote, in French, from Antoine de Saint Exupéry, who wrote *The Little Prince*. Translated, it reads: “As for the future, it is not a question of foreseeing it, but of making it possible.”⁴ However, as the report is careful to acknowledge, it is one thing to say what it is possible to do within the bounds of physical science; quite another to translate that into politics, policy, and practical action. At this juncture, at what has been called “the physics–politics gap”, most of the mainstream discourse gets stuck. Ergo, the angst of climate-change campaigners, and their sense of being trapped.

Personally, I think that there are ways forward. They mean setting aside such quasi-conspiratorial notions as human extinction by the year 20-whenever, or whatever, and planning action not just in the short term, but simultaneously for the medium and long terms (by which I mean before and after the turn of this century). Put simply, *total greenhouse-gas emissions equal population multiplied by consumption*. Some would add *technology* into that equation, but my simplification assumes it to be integrated into emissions caused by material consumption.

Accordingly, if either human population numbers or the levels of material consumption fall, then we are on the right path. In my book *Riders on the Storm*⁵ I have asserted that the population agenda must not be conflated with authoritarian notions of ‘population control’. Rather, there is abundant demographic evidence that fertility rates fall naturally, and rapidly, when two main conditions are satisfied: a secure and just society (call it ‘social security’ for short) and women’s emancipation. In the words of the poet Adrienne Rich:⁶

The decision to feed the world
is the real decision. No revolution
has chosen it. For that choice requires
that women shall be free.

⁴ IPCC, *Special Report: Global Warming of 1.5 °C*, Geneva, 2018, <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>.

⁵ Alastair McIntosh, *Riders on the Storm: The Climate Crisis and the Survival of Being* (Birlinn, 2020).

⁶ Adrienne Rich, ‘Hunger (for Audre Lorde)’, *The Dream of a Common Language*, W.W. Norton, NY, 1978, p. 13.

Furthermore, the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by all member states in 2015, provide a roadmap towards such objectives. These include such driving themes as zero hunger, gender equality, responsible consumption, climate action, and peace, justice, and strong institutions.⁷ When people ask, "What can I do?", I reply: "Work as best you can on pretty much any of the UN's SDGs". Translate concern to care; to create a care society. But there is an even bigger picture, and this is where theology and its application in spirituality kick in.

* * * * *

In October 2022, the European Unitarian Universalists invited me to speak at their annual conference in Mittelwihr, Alsace. Somebody said beforehand, with what I hoped was a wry but jocund nod, "Don't give them too much Christianity". So I gave them lots! But in counterpoint I preached the Sunday sermon from the Bhagavad Gita, the most sacred text of Hinduism, and specifically from Juan Mascaró's beautiful Penguin Classics translation of the first half of the first verse of the first chapter.

It reads: "*On the field of Truth, on the battle-field of life, what came to pass, Sanjaya....*",⁸ employing three Sanskrit words (*Dharmakshétre ... Kurukshétra ... Sanjaya*) which encapsulate for me three key ontological perspectives. Each of them is nested within the others, and it is my experience that with them we can spiritually fortify the effectiveness of our engagement with climate change. I will take them in reverse order. That way, we can view them from a human standpoint.

First, who is Sanjaya? Sanjaya is the eagle-eyed charioteer of the blind king, Dhritarashtra. Blind, because political power is blind. That is why it needs an eagle-eyed charioteer. This is the level of immanent action in the world, in the present moment, when, as Extinction Rebellion urges, we must "act now!". Let that be our immediate calling, and let us remember also the expression of a French Jesuit priest, Jean-Pierre de Caussade: "*the sacrament of the present moment*".⁹ If our activism calls us to break laws, then let us break them as we might break bread: sacramentally.

Juan Mascaró, whose sensitive translation was praised by Rabindranath Tagore, renders *Kurukshétra* as "*the battlefield of life*": the realm of all our inner and outer conflicts. This is the second level, where we glimpse intimations that individual spiritual life is not detached from the life of the world. Our locus of agency as activists widens.

The third, and ultimate, level is that of *Dharmakshétre*, the field of Truth, of *Dharma*, of "*the way, the truth, and the life*", as Jesus put it. That is the level that reminds us that the whole shebang is held in God's hands. We can live our lives, we can engage in the hand-to-hand

⁷ UN, *Sustainable Development Goals*, 2015, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

⁸ *The Bhagavad Gita* (trans. Juan Mascaró) (Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, 1962, p. 43).

⁹ Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment* (Fount Classics, London, 1996).

'fight' of daily action, but never forget, as the Moody Blues' 'Om' lyric has it, that "*far away, the distant sound/ is with us every day*".¹⁰

Here we see the roots of the kind of American Transcendentalism that Ralph Waldo Emerson, with his Unitarian associations, wrote about. But the transcendent walks hand in hand with the immanent. Such is the significance of 'incarnate' Christian theology, where the living 'blood' of the Spirit interpenetrates the 'bread' that is the fabric of the universe. And that is deeply challenging. From this deepest level, our calling may be as expressed by the Orthodox tradition of Eastern Christianity, which maintains that St Silouan of Mount Athos heard Christ say: "*Keep your soul in hell and do not despair*".¹¹

To quote Sheila Stewart, the tradition bearer of Scotland's ('Gypsy') Travelling People, writing of her people's hard times and cruel persecutions, especially of the past: "*God's no' sleeping*".¹²

It is here that the work of faith groups is so important in our times. I speak to many such groups, and my constant message to them is this. Ours is not to replicate the work of secular groups like Greenpeace, WWF, or Friends Of The Earth. Ours is to be salt of the earth, leaven to the bread, light to the world. Consider again the equation that *greenhouse-gas emissions = population x consumption*. Today the greater part of that equation is played by consumption. In my lifetime alone, since 1955, world population has roughly trebled, but greenhouse-gas emissions from consumption have increased around sixfold. I define consumerism as *consumption in excess of what is needed for a dignified sufficiency of life*. But dignified sufficiency is both quantitative and qualitative, and to achieve more satisfaction out of less material input, and therefore lower emissions, is more a question of psychology and spirituality than of economics and technology. What faith groups can bring to the climate crisis is, therefore, a deepening understanding of how to live life: as Jesus put it in one of my favourite Bible translations, "*that they might have not just any sodding old life, but promised life abundantly*".¹³ That's about our inner work, but spiritual qualities also play out into our outer lives, our work for justice and peace, our hands-in-the-soil work, as one of the chapters in this collection has it, of "*redeeming a rubbish dump*".

We must be humble. Each of us is but one eight billionth of the human race. Ours is to participate in the work of God, but to remember that we are not God. Ours is to do what we can, and then remember, whether literally or metaphorically, the Sabbath, the time of rest,

¹⁰ The Moody Blues, 'The Word / Om', *In Search of the Lost Chord*, Deram, 1968, YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRGJbk4XpYs&t=28s>.

¹¹ Paul Evdokimov, *In the World, of the Church* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York, 2001, p. 193).

¹² Sheila Stewart, *Pilgrims of the Mist* (Birlinn, Edinburgh, 2008, p. 19).

¹³ John 10:10, MOT (My Own Translation).

and that it was “*made for man, not man for the Sabbath*”.¹⁴ But that eight billionth can, before the lens of God, be magnified. “*My soul doth magnify the Lord*”, said Mary,¹⁵ and the Greek word *megalynei*, as in our word ‘mega’, literally means to make great. How? Through such acts as witness, prayer, and prophecy. Through asking inwardly to be held in God, to hold one another in God, and the matters that we feel passionate about. “*Members of a liberal faith tend to be reluctant to take up a prophetic stance, lest it be construed as evangelism*”, concedes Maria Curtis in her Preface to this book. But then, and with resurgent energy, she adds: “*perhaps now is the time to reclaim prophetic witness*”.

Yes, indeed, Maria and your fellow writers and the wider Unitarian movement! Within this book are both roadmaps and social legitimation for so doing. I am a Quaker, not a Unitarian, but in those of your services that I have attended I have seen an open and even interfaith theology, more outward structure than a Quaker meeting, and an approach to ‘worship’ – etymologically, a ‘worthship’ – that will speak to the need of many people for ritual, music, warm local presence, and even “a damned good sermon”!

The prophetic, as a social expression of the mystical, opens the inner eye. How do we open such vision? Jesus said: “*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*”¹⁶ The Chandogya Upanishad of the Vedic traditions says: “*There is a bridge between time and Eternity; and this bridge is Atman, the spirit of man.*”¹⁷ There we glimpse the ‘over-soul’¹⁸ as expressed by Emerson, himself of a Unitarian family, ordained in Unitarian ministry, and influenced by his reading of the Bhagavad Gita and other Vedic thought. To make this connection between the transcendent and the immanent, heaven and earth, the inner and the outer, is the great work for which our times call. It is the work of reconnecting Nature and our human nature, whereby, as the ending of the New Testament echoes the prophet Ezekiel, “*the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations*”.¹⁹ The passage from the Chandogya Upanishad quoted above goes on to spell out the consequences of such bridging very clearly:

Evil or sin cannot cross that bridge, because the world of the Spirit is pure. This is why when this bridge has been crossed, the eyes of the blind can see, the wounds of the wounded are healed, and the sick man becomes whole from his sickness.

¹⁴ Mark 2:27, New Internationalist Version. In which respect, note the Green Sabbath Project: <https://www.greensabbathproject.net/>.

¹⁵ Luke 1:46, King James Version.

¹⁶ Matthew 5:8, King James Version.

¹⁷ *The Upanishads* (trans. Juan Mascaró), Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, 1965. (Chandogya 8.4.1, p. 121.)

¹⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘The Over-Soul’, *Essays, First Series*, American Transcendentalism Web, originally 1841, <https://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/oversoul.html>

¹⁹ Ezekiel 47:12; Revelation 22:2, New Revised Standard Version.

Finally, back to Sophie's question: *"What if it's already too late?"* It is already too late for so much, Sophie. And yet you are here, and I am here, and we are all together. As long as you can plant a seed in the soil, and as long as it grows, it's not too late in any final sense. *"We are stardust/ We are golden/ And we've got to get ourselves/ Back to the garden."*²⁰

Let us study this book, rejoice, and dig from where we stand.

Alastair McIntosh

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²⁰ Joni Mitchell, 'Woodstock', 1970, <https://jonimitchell.com/music/song.cfm?id=75>.