

Beyond lightbulbs: How should we live, culturally, creatively, spiritually, urban-ly in the Anthropocene?

The International Commission on Stratigraphy is on the verge of declaring a new geological epoch, called the Anthropocene. Alternatively we could say, the people who study and interpret the history of the earth are beginning a new chapter - a chapter dedicated to the impact of humanity.

This is becoming knowledge and the Guardian reports: 'The current epoch, the Holocene, is the 12,000 years of stable climate since the last ice age during which settled, agricultural human civilisation developed. But the striking acceleration since the mid-20th century of carbon dioxide emissions and sea level rise, the global mass extinction of species, and the transformation of land by deforestation and development mark the end of that slice of geological time, the experts argue. The Earth is so profoundly changed that the Holocene must give way to the Anthropocene.' (Guardian 29 Aug 2016).

What evidence can we find in the rocks, soil, water and atmosphere to support this new boundary? Geological time is usually measured in rock strata by studying the prevalence of minerals or fossils. For example, rocks laid down around 65 million years ago have an unusually high abundance of the element iridium, attributed to the meteorite that wiped out the dinosaurs. However, this new boundary is likely to be marked by an unusually high prevalence of radioactive nuclei, micro-plastics, and chicken bones which have been laid down since the mid-20th century. The nature of the materials and the short time period in which they have accumulated are both unprecedented in earth history, which more usually counts its milestones in millions and tens of millions of years.

End of geology lesson! So we find ourselves part of a planet that is rapidly changing and radically different from anything we have ever experienced AS A SPECIES. We have grown and developed physically, emotionally, spiritually, culturally in the context of an earth system that is no more. How should we live in this new world? (Note: I tend to look for words and images other than 'environment' when describing where we live. Environment has come to represent something other than, or outside ourselves, and I want to underline that we ARE the environment, we ARE the earth, we don't live in or on the planet with our true self somewhere else. Using words like 'world' or 'system' help with this.) Many thinkers are trying to bring us home to the earth. I want to outline some of Sallie McFague's theology around the body of God, interspersed with a few other ideas, and you have more thoughts on your sheets.

Sallie McFague says squarely that global warming occurs because we lack an appropriate understanding of ourselves as inextricably bound to the planet and its systems. This makes climate change a theological and spiritual challenge as much as an engineering one. She

asserts that, within the context of a world radically threatened by climate change, we must focus on deconstructing and reconstructing two key doctrines: who we are and who God is. More specifically she says 'if we do not change our basic assumptions about God and ourselves from an individualistic to a communitarian view, can we expect people to change their behaviour?' Climate change brings to a head, in a negative and frightening way, 'the ecological turn' which has been gaining momentum in many areas of thought (e.g. eco-feminism, process thought, much indigenous thinking and liberation theologies). Climate change challenges our ideas of who **we are** by telling us that our conventional consumer-culture anthropology is false. Climate change challenges our ideas **about God** by warning that a supernatural, transcendent god is neither faithful to the tradition's incarnationalism, nor relevant for our times. So different ways of envisioning ourselves and God are necessary.

Tough talk! So what does she have to say about these different ways of seeing ourselves and God? Here are 4 ideas:

1. First and crucially, the church cannot claim to be catholic or universal if it leaves creation out. God's household is the whole planet, with human beings living in inter-dependent relations with ALL other life forms and earth processes. In order for the whole planet to flourish, resources must be distributed justly amongst all its inhabitants. This means many humans will have to live differently, accepting a life of limitation. Salvation means the well-being of all creation. **So our theology must be cosmological**, over and above personal and political.
2. **We must become ecologically literate.** The derivation of ecology is oikos and logos – words about home, or the study of home. (She comments that economy and ecumenical also derive from oikos). We behave as though there are no limits, whereas the truth is there is no such thing as a free lunch, as per the second law of thermodynamics. She suggests 3 house rules: take only your share; clean up after yourself; keep the house in good repair for others. Most radically, ecological literacy will lead from democracy to biocracy, and an ecological economics.
3. **The world is internally related to God, it is God's body**, rather than externally related as the product of an artist or maker. God is incarnate in the world, we and God are in the same place and share responsibility. This means we need a change in focus of the traditional creation myth. She says: 'What is left out of the traditional Christian creation myth is creation itself, the fascinating, wonderful details of physical reality. It is about history, not geography, about God's action through the sweep of time, not about our life on planet earth...In fact the story does not seem to be about creation, but about a God who 'must be pure and distinct in reality and essence from the world'. This God does not inhabit creation. If God is spirit and creation is matter, then God does not occupy the earth and we need not attend to it either. BUT What if

spirit and matter were intrinsically related rather than diametrically opposed. Would this not make a difference in how we think of where God is and where we should be. Would it not turn our eyes to the earth, whether we are searching for God or trying to understand where we belong?' The surrealist poet Paul Eluard put it like this: 'There is another world, but it's in this one' – and his job was to write hundreds of letters to bereaved families from the trenches in WW1. In this 'creation Christianity' we are at home here on the earth. McFague says that in this model of the world as God's body, 'the conventional meaning of transcendence as other than this world is subverted into radical immanence...transcendence means awakening to the needs of others'

4. We need to pay attention, with delight and joy, rather than consume. Simone Weil says we should look, not eat. And this will lead to making space so others can live, which entails dispossession, self-limitation, sacrifice, asceticism, simplicity – **kenosis** – not as self-denying acts but as affirmation of the other.

On the basis of these ideas, McFague goes on to slate market capitalism and individualism, and recognizes that much blame for the state of the world lies at the feet of a wrong-headed Christian world view (my words). (Incidentally, when Lynn White first charged Christianity with ecological destruction in the 60s, he was compared to Luther nailing his 95 theses to the church door.) Anyway, McFague proposes 4 steps for action:

First, become conscious that economics as we have experienced it is a model, not a description of how to allocate scarce resources. There are other ways to live.

Second, suggest some alternative visions of the good life that are just and sustainable. Ask what really makes people happy.

Third, rich Christians need to publicly advocate an ecological model of economics.

Fourth, rethink basic doctrines about who we think we are and what we should do in this very different context. Norman Habel, initiator of Creation Time and author of 'An Inconvenient Text' (a sort of green biblical midrash) is very helpful here. He says:

'To be green I would argue is to have empathy with earth. And that empathy is grounded in the reality that I and every other human being are children of the earth. For millions of years all forms of life – including humans - have been nurtured by the elements and impulses of the earth. I am an integral part of the living web called creation. I taste the same salt water as the dolphin. I depend on the trees for oxygen. I celebrate life with the blue wren in my garden. And I suffer with the soil when it is polluted by nuclear waste. The task before me is to translate that empathy into a fresh way of reading the text. I adopt this approach because I have become conscious that I am one with earth in a way that was not fully apparent in the past.'

I called this session 'Beyond lightbulbs' in an attempt to get at the spiritual dimensions of our response to climate change. However, as I've gone along I've come to think of it as 'Underpinning lightbulbs' – the crucial changes of attitude and worldview that we will need if we are to change our behaviour. I'd like to finish with a short reflection, and invite you to close your eyes if you would like.

Reflection:

'It is in our lungs that we connect to our Earth's great aerial bloodstream, and in this way the atmosphere inspires us from our first breath to our last. The time-honoured custom of slapping new-borns on the bottom to elicit a drawing of breath, and a holding of a mirror to the lips of the dying are bookmarks of our existence. And it is the atmosphere's oxygen that sparks our inner fire, permitting us to move, eat and reproduce, indeed to live. Clean, fresh air gulped straight from the great aerial ocean is not just an old-fashioned tonic for human health, it is life itself, and 13.5 kg of it are required by every adult, every day of their lives.'

Tim Flannery

Other ideas:

The romantic poets – ecological conversion

Some strands of Eco-psychology champion the idea of panentheism and try to counter the modern Western prejudice that the soul is within. Need for reclaiming a panentheistic vision for the Judeo Christian tradition. The neo-platonic tradition and Christian mystics hold this.

Lynn White 'The historical roots of the ecologic crisis' circa 1960 first tackled the role of Christianity and dominion. Been compared to Luther's 95 theses nailed to the church door

Charges of 'heavenism' challenged by Fox et al

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Some readings for Vagabonds 18th Sept 2016

1. 'At the heart of Northcott's book is the thesis that climate change has proved so intractable because it challenges modernity's understanding of reality. Ever since Copernicus and Galileo, humans have been removed from the centre of the universe, yet now we are faced with a reality that the planet is being irrevocably changed by human activity. "The Anthropocene is a second Copernican turn because it puts humanity back into planetary history as its most influential shaper." In shaping modern thought Bacon, Descartes and their successors separated nature from culture.... The modern world was supposed to be a neutral de-sacralised space to be exploited and shaped. But climate science is a hybrid, a combination of natural and human, of scientific facts and moral values, and as such, it returns us to a worldview closer to that of Jeremiah than of modern politicians and scientists'
From a review of 'A political theology of climate change' by Michael Northcott in 'Modern Believing'.
2. 'The earth is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects' *Thomas Berry*
3. 'When I was seven years old I loved God and the world and wasn't willing to give up either'
'Jesus must be loved as a world'
Teilhard de Chardin
4. 'Climate change, quite simply, is the issue of our time. It is not one issue among many, but, like the canary in the mine, it is warning us that the way we are living on our planet is causing us to head for disaster. We must change. All of the other issues we care about – social justice, peace, prosperity, freedom – cannot occur unless our planet is healthy. It is the unifying issue of our time; it is our World War II, as it were: the concern that must develop into a world-wide movement for change of mind and change of action.'
Sallie McFague
5. 'The cosmos is a single living creature which contains all living creatures within it' *Plato*
6. 'The poverty and austerity of St. Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled (11). Rather than a problem to be solved, the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise (12)'
Laudato si
7. 'We are stardust' *Probably Carl Sagan*
8. 'The "dust" that we are results from hydrogen and helium that date to about 13.8 billion years ago. "Star-stuff" became planet earth about 4.5 billion years ago, and eventually birds, monkeys, music and laughter. Humans have been part of it for about 200,000 years. Anthropocentrism is the "ism" that places humans as separate from, and above, the rest of creation, regarding humans as the central and most important element of creation.'
Loosely from 'The Universe Story'
9. 'We are not our own. Nothing is itself taken alone. Things are because of interrelations and interconnections.'
Wallace Stevens
10. 'Being here is magnificent'. *Rainer Maria Rilke*

