# Theme 2 – Improving the State of Our Knowledge

## Presentation: Science, Religion and Sustainable Development

### *Presenter: Professor Herman E Daly*

The environment and the economy are in mortal combat. Sustainable development is an effort to resolve this conflict. But why does the effort to deal with this impending Armageddon inspire such a low sense of urgency in major institutions like the University, the Church and most national governments? These institutions are certainly not protecting the earth from destruction in the manner of the four angels in Revelation 7:1 'holding back the four winds of the earth so that no wind could blow on land or sea or against any tree'. Of course there are individual exceptions in each of these domains - prophetic voices that cry in the wilderness. But why are these cries evoking so little response in so much wilderness?

If the Apocalypse of St John the Divine is thought simply to provide environmentalists with an ancient model for how to scare people into repentance with forecasts of doom, its message may actually be contrary to environmentalism according to former US Secretary of the Interior, James Watt. His argument was that if the end of the world is near, then it makes no sense to save anything for a non-existent beneficiary. Is there not a more hopeful message in Revelation? I believe there is, and I want to consider in some detail why this message of hope is so little heard today, why our ears have become deaf to it.

Some prominent scientists have decided that science has the techniques but is unable to ignite sufficient moral fervour to induce the public to finance the policies that apply them. They thought that it would be worth a try to appeal to religion to supply the missing moral fervour as a basis for consensus and action. This resulted, in May 1992, in the 'Joint Appeal by Science and Religion on the Environment', led by the eminent scientists Carl Sagan, Edward O. Wilson and Stephen Jay Gould, along with a few religious leaders and hosted by then Senator Al Gore. The three scientists are well known not only for their highly informed and genuine concern about the environment, but also for their scientific materialism and consequent renunciation of any religious interpretation of the cosmos. What then was their rationale for courting the religious community? It was that while science presumably had the understanding on which to act, it lacked the moral inspiration to do so and inspire others to.

I attended the conference and was vaguely troubled at the time by what seemed to me a somewhat less than honest appeal by the scientists to a rather credulous group of religious leaders. A year or so later I read a book by a theologian, John F Haught, who had also been present, and discovered that he had precisely articulated my doubts.

Haught wondered:

> whether it is completely honest for them (the scientists) to drink in this case so lustily from the stream of moral fervor that flows from what they have consistently taken to be the inappropriate and even false consciousness of religious believers... the well-intended effort by the skeptics to co-opt the moral enthusiasm of the religious for the sake of ecology is especially puzzling, in view of the fact that it is only because believers take their religious symbols and ideas to be disclosive of the *truth* of reality that they are aroused to moral passion in the first place. If devotees thought that their religions were *not* representative of the way things *really* are, then the religions would be ethically impotent'.[1]

Haught instead holds that only an integrally religious perspective is adequate:

> It is hard to imagine how any thorough transformation of the habits of humans will occur without a corporate human confidence in the ultimate worthwhileness of our moral endeavours. And without a deep trust in reality itself, ecological morality will, I am afraid, ultimately languish and die. Such trust ... must be grounded in a conviction that the universe carries a meaning, or that it is the unfolding of a 'promise'. A commonly held sense that the cosmos is a significant process,

> that it unfolds something analogous to what we humans call 'purpose' is, I think, an essential prerequisite of sustained global and intergenerational commitment to the earth's well-being.[2]

The point, of course, is that Sagan, Wilson and Gould proclaim the cosmology of scientific materialism, which considers the cosmos and life to be no more than accidents, ultimately reducible to dead matter in motion. In their view there is no such thing as value in any objective sense, or purpose, beyond short term survival and reproduction which are purely instinctual, and thus ultimately mechanical. Calling for a moral compass in such a world is as absurd as calling for a magnetic compass in a world in which you proclaim that there is no such thing as magnetic north.

One might reply that objective value may not exist externally, but nevertheless does exist as an internal affair created by humans (or by God in humans) and imposed by them on the external world. This is the solution of dualism, dominant since Descartes. Such a view, however, is contrary to the evolutionary understanding according to which human beings have kinship with other forms of life, as affirmed by science. On this basis scientific materialism has denied the reality of purpose, mind and value in human beings as well as in the external world, such that they are considered mere epiphenomena, ultimately explainable in terms of underlying physical structures and motions. However another resolution that still takes science seriously, is to affirm that purpose and value is not a human monopoly, but is the basis of the real kinship among species.

This alternative to scientific materialism is worked out in the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. His view is radically empirical. What we know most concretely and directly, unmediated by the sometimes deceptive senses or by abstract concepts, is our inner experience of purpose. That should be the starting point, the most well known thing in terms of which we try to explain less well known things. To begin with highly abstract concepts, such as electrons and photons, and explain the immediate experience of purpose as an 'epiphenomenon' incidentally produced by the behaviour of these abstractions, is an example of what Whitehead called the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness'. I do not pretend that Whiteheadean philosophy is without difficulties of its own, but it strains my credulity a lot less than scientific materialism. Whitehead observed, 'Scientists animated by the purpose of proving that they are purposeless constitute an interesting subject for study'.[3]

We might add that religious persons animated by belief in a Creator God, yet happily participating in the destruction of Creation, also constitute an interesting subject for study. It is indeed a paradox that people whose professed beliefs give them no good reason to be environmentalists are usually trying harder to save the environment than are people whose beliefs give them a very good reason to be environmentalists. Gould has noted that 'we will not fight to save what we do not love'.[4] God's world *is* loveable and ironically scientists often fall in love with it much more deeply than theologians! There is something fundamentally silly about biologists teaching on MWF that everything, including our sense of value and reason, is a purposeless product of genetic chance and environmental necessity, and then on TTS trying to convince the public that they should love this same purposeless world enough to fight to save it. They are trying to live by the fruit of the tree whose tap root they are cutting. Our entire society, including the scientists, is living off the depleting moral capital of traditional religious belief, just as surely as it is living off the depleting natural capital of the ecosystem.

In the discussions during the meeting in Washington DC of the joint appeal, the void of purpose was frequently glossed over in discussions with the phrase 'for our children'. But of course if we are accidents then so are they, and the question is merely begged by pushing it one generation forward. I recall that one lady was so annoyed by this cloying invocation of 'our children', that she took the microphone to say that she had no children, so was she to understand that she had no reason to care about the future of God's Creation? Though she was not even an official participant, I thought her intervention one of the best.

Environmentalists really must face up to deep philosophical and religious questions about why their efforts ultimately make sense. Neither vague pantheistic sentimentality about Gaia, nor the *ad hoc* invention of instincts like 'biophilia' can withstand much philosophical criticism, though they are welcome first steps away from scientific materialism. I find the ideals of a minority of Christian thinkers influenced by Whitehead, such as John B Cobb, Jr, John F Haught and Charles Birch, to offer a much more solid base than either scientific materialism or traditional theology for loving nature enough to save it.

Many traditional religions also share a theology of creation (not the same as the literalistic doctrine of 'scientific creationism'), so a theological basis for 'biophilia' as a persuasive virtue rather than a mechanical instinct is by no means limited to Christianity. All traditional religions are in fact enemies of the same modern idolatry - the idea that accidental man through science and technology is the true creator, and that the natural world is just the instrument to be used in furthering the arbitrary projects of one purposeless species. If we cannot assert a more coherent cosmology than that, then we might as well close the door and all go fishing - at least, while the fish last.

I certainly sympathise with the Eastern Church's early reluctance to admit Revelation to the Canon. We no longer understand the imagery of apocalyptic literature, and consequently the book has become the happy hunting ground for crazed, literalist, would-be messiahs of which David Koresh is only the most recent. But we need its affirmation of cosmic purpose today. In fact, it is the denial of purpose, explicit in modern scientific materialism and deconstructionism, that drives people to look for purpose wherever they can find it, underground, as it were. Universities have totally abdicated on questions of meaning and purpose, while mainline Churches are often so identified with the dominant culture that their affirmation seems muted. This frequently leaves fundamentalist sects as the only alternative to secular meaninglessness.

It is the message of the purpose of Creation that must be recaptured on the nineteen-hundredth anniversary of the Book of Revelation. To claim that the whole show is a purposeless exercise in random change leaves would-be environmentalists without a leg to stand on. Both science and Christianity believe that the world will end - even Revelation's four angels at the four corners of the earth were only *temporarily* holding back the winds of destruction. However Christianity affirms God's promise that neither the world while it exists, nor its ultimate demise, are purposeless. To end the world prematurely by our own actions, I submit, is to usurp God's prerogative and is analogous to an individual committing suicide. In Revelation, after all the conflict, destruction, and decay, God's promise is affirmed in the final vision - that of the same tree of life as in Genesis, but this time instead of forbidden fruit it has healing leaves.

[1] John F Haught, *The Promise of Nature: Ecology and Cosmic Purpose*, The Paulist Press: Mahwah, N J, 1993, p.9. See also Charles Birch, *On Purpose*, New South Wales University Press Ltd., Kensington, NSW, Australia, 1980.

[2] Haught, op cit. p.7

[3] A N Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*, Princeton University Press, 1929, p.16

[4] S J Gould, *Unenchanted Evening*, Natural History September 1991, p.14. For an insightful discussion see David Orr, *Earth in Mind,* Island Press, Washington DC, 1994, Chapter 20.