Faith, Climate Change and the Environment Background Discussion Paper.

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For Footprint 2018 workshops at Durham University 16th June

Climate Change is not solely an economic problem, though economics maybe argued to be the main driver, it is also a cultural, moral and a religious or faith problem too. But today it is with the a religious or faith approach to the problem of climate change that we will be focusing.

All religions/faiths have an association with the environment. Portrayal of human interaction with the land and nature can be found in all the main ancient religions (and modern ones too). For example, there are texts/poems/songs of humans farming, hunting, travelling, surviving, as well as vast amounts references to the weather, trees, plants and animals, not to mention the sun moon and stars. The natural environment in which humans lived, completely surrounded them and this was key to their understanding of self in relation to nature. Of course, added to all this was the belief in a Creator or created order of the earth and universe of which there are countless stories the world over. (Walk on concrete from home to /school/work etc).

Within the Abrahamic faiths, there is the concept and surrounding narratives dealing with ‘Responsible Stewardship’ of the divine creation, a creation that needs to be carefully managed as it has been placed in our care on behalf of God. This is a concept open to interpretation. Some followers of this tradition may claim that God has given us the resources that we need and will continue to provide, and that no concept of climate change offers any real challenge to God, or threat to humans. This is an interpretation of human dominion rather than stewardship. However, many would counter this interpretation with one of ‘Responsible Stewardship’, where the relationship between humans and nature and God is reciprocal and one of peace and harmony. The flipside of this is that with the idea of responsibility comes accountability and judgement and when we get it wrong the consequences can be dire i.e. apocalypse! Most famous perhaps is the story of the flood, which is referenced in more than just the bible (Gilgamesh).

Non-biblical faiths offer other narratives. Hinduism and Buddhism have the concept of Karma – cause and effect. Briefly, in Buddhism the weight is placed on the intention while in Hinduism it is placed on past action. Originally the concept was not so much as what is right and wrong action or blame, but about what is the best course of action and consequence for the situation needing a decision. In Hinduism, the focus tended to be on human survival, power, etc. whereas Buddhism saw this in connection with every aspect of living, whether human or non-human. Though, Hinduism also has the concept of Ahimsa, non-violence which applies to all life. The idea that there is a balance to be struck runs through most of these religions, but it is probably most popularly understood in the Daoist symbol of Yin and Yang. A Daoist explanation of our situation is that *“Carbon fuels are yin – earthly. When we burn them they become gases, yang, and ascend to the sky. This means the fundamental balance of yin and yang is thrown out of kilter, and we as humanity have failed to fulfil our role as those who maintain balance. This means that burning fossil fuel is against the Dao.”* (Cited in an article by Martin Palmer in Faith Initiative, Issue 38, p37)

Religions have been recording the stories of the interaction of humans with humans and humans and their environment for a long time. Whether oral or written many of these stories still survive today in some shape or form, and people can still relate to them. The historical contexts may have changed but the stories themselves haven’t. They are powerful and accessible in themselves. We still farm, hunt, fish, survive, travel, go to war, make peace, deal with disasters, fall in love. We still have the ability to imagine and create – good and bad, harmony and disharmony. There is still wisdom in many of the stories, a heritage of human life experience passed down from a time we can only guess and not just human life but the totality of life. What the stories teach maybe varied from cause and effect, stewardship or the need for balance and harmony, but the common thread running through, is a concept of right relationship. If humans are in ‘right relationship’ to nature, with one another and with God, then it could be argued we are making the right decisions, with the right outcomes driven by a need for balance and harmony and not the economics of capitalist consumerism.

So, I have two questions that I would like you to discuss and explore.

1. What can religions offer to the climate change debate or do they have absolutely no relevance? (Narratives/teachings/symbols that can be related to our situation today. Ideas of right relationship/stewardship/balance/harmony)

2. What can people of faith do in standing by their beliefs to minimize climate change? (looking at this from a personal/faith community/interfaith- communities. Ideas might be - not using single use plastics and environmentally harmful products/using organic food produce. Being more confident in voicing their beliefs/ challenging leadership both within and out with a faith/religion. Demonstrate/community projects/using solar panels or wind turbines etc.)