

Touchstone

Volume 30

September 2012

Number 3

OBITUARY FOR THE EARTH?

CONTENTS

Editorial 3

Articles

Climate Holocaust, Mortal Planet and *Eschaton*
Harold Wells..... 7

Does it All End with Beetles? Eco-theology: a Mutation of “Science”
Linda Yates 21

Climate Change Discourse and the Biblical Template of Knowledge
Erin Green 30

From the Heart about the Heart of the Matter
Mardi Tindal 38

Profile

Faith in Development: Donald K. Faris’ Path to a New Mission
Ruth Compton Brouwer 43

Review Article

Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days
by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins
Adam Kilner 52

Reviews

Ordered Liberty: Readings in the History of United Church Worship

by William Kervin

Mac Watts..... 59

Practicing Reverence: an ethic for sustainable earth communities

by Ross L. Smillie

Shawn Sanford-Beck 62

Living Hope: the Future and Christian Faith

by David H. Jensen

David Crombie 64

Here on Earth: A Natural History of the Planet

by Tim Flannery

Mark Hathaway 66

Three Ways of Grace: Drawing Closer to the Trinity

Edited by Rock Lockhart and Rob Fennell

Ali Smith 69

The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock

by Fred Craddock

Rob McConnell 71

Editorial

There have been times in the past several years when I caught myself thinking that Ontario—where I live—was doing fairly well in the climate change sweepstakes. This summer, though, drought came to the province, particularly affecting the near north where we have a cottage. Hardly any rain fell in July, creating tinder-box fire conditions and lowering water levels. Along our shoreline the water level was down at least fourteen inches, affecting boat docking and creating beaches where none had existed before. Local wells have run dry. Hay crops have proved to be mostly dried-out stalks. Then, torrential rains came in the first half of August—too late for field crops but a welcome relief for gardens, wells and forests. The water level of the lake has risen only a few inches.

There still may be folk somewhere, living in pockets of denial, who think that climate change is a dreamt-up fiction of urban socialist elites, but even the rednecks are believers in this neck of the woods. One of them, in fact, has built a dam on a remote part of his forested property and intends to generate electricity from it—for the benefit of his grandchildren. Because he's ideologically opposed to government intrusions, he has not sought any grants in carrying out this expensive project. It's a venture of self-reliant sustainability in the face of the rising cost of electric power.

This number of *Touchstone* is dedicated to the theme of the besieged environment and the grim prospect that humanity is pushing, or already has pushed, the planet to the brink of catastrophe. The predictions of a calamitous end of life on Earth in 2011 by Harold Camping, and by those influenced by the abrupt termination of a Mayan calendar this year on the winter solstice, serve to amplify concern about the fate of the Earth and the role of *homo sapiens*. Such predictions of an imminent end are nothing new, of course, and the gospels record that Jesus had to warn his contemporaries against such fruitless distractions.

What should we be doing—if anything—about the prospect of an obituary for the Earth? On the campaign trail for the presidency, John F. Kennedy addressed fears in his day by telling the story of a late eighteenth-century time in the United States when anxious expectation of the end was not uncommon. The Connecticut legislative assembly was meeting when the sky over Hartford darkened ominously at mid-day. Out

of the deepening gloom came a call for adjournment so that members could return to their families and prepare to meet their Maker. The speaker ruled the motion out of order, reasoning: “If it is not the Day of Judgment, then we would be adjourning needlessly. If it is the Day of Judgment, then we should be found doing our duty. Therefore I desire that candles be brought.”

In the face of environmental crisis and amid ever-recurring predictions of a supernaturally interposed end, Jesus’ warning suggests that Christian disciples should be about “our Father’s business.” This would mean continued sharing of the good news that a sovereign Love is drawing all creaturely life toward a blessed consummation and has decisively taken the field in the humanity and work of Jesus Christ. It also would mean serving the triune God’s own deep commitment to the created order. As Calvin repeatedly emphasized, the works of creation constitute “a dazzling theatre of the divine glory.” If God’s self-revelation is anchored in the wonder and beauty of creation, then how could we not be concerned about its defacement and destruction? Central to our service of God’s mission today is “the stewardship of life” (Douglas Hall).

Back in the nineties I had the privilege of serving as General Secretary for Theology, Faith and Ecumenism in the General Council Office of the United Church. One of the responsibilities of this portfolio was staffing the Committee on Inter-church and Inter-faith Relations (ICIF), and so I served on the writing team for *Mending the World* (*MTW*), approved by the General Council as a lens through which to view and assess the programs of the Church. The process leading to this latest definition of United Church ecumenism began almost ten years before its adoption with an interview survey of key United Church leaders about the renewal of our ecumenical mandate. These interviews led the ICIF Committee to conclude that what God cares about is not the unity of the church so much as the well-being of the planet. If the scope of ecumenism is “the whole inhabited earth,” then Christians cannot be unconcerned about the fate of the planet. So came about the conviction that the United Church needs to embrace “whole-world ecumenism” and to seek to serve God’s world-mending work, a work that extends well beyond the salvation of individual humans or the mandate to seek greater visible unity in the universal church. *MTW* also stressed the importance of

collaborating not only with other churches, but also with other religions and ideologies, as well as committed people of no explicit religious conviction.

MTW had been preceded by a preliminary report based on the interviews of key leaders. This report, *Toward a Renewed Understanding of Ecumenism*, had been circulated throughout the Church for study and response, and also to inter-church colleagues for comment. As a result of the responses, discussed at the first ICIF meeting I attended, the Committee decided that it needed to take seriously the criticisms of the report's lack of christology and its apparent dismissal of the importance of inter-church relations. Its work of revision became *Mending the World*. While *MTW* does not quite balance the call for inter-faith collaboration with continuing commitment to seeking greater visible unity in the body of Christ, the General Council receiving it did.

What is most impressive in *MTW* itself is the substantial place it gives to christology. Indeed, key members of the writing team believed that United Church convictions about stewardship of the environment and relations with other religions should be expressed, *not despite distinctive Christian beliefs, but because of them*. Following the lead of Douglas Hall, *MTW* presents a "representative christology," according to which the unity of the divine and human in one person means that Christ is representative of both God and humanity. Taking a further lead from the Logos christology of the New Testament, *MTW* goes on to speak of Christ as representative of all creation. The prologue to John's gospel and the introduction to Hebrews carry this eminent theme of instrumental authorship of creation by the Logos, as does Colossians: "For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created . . . all things have been created through him and for him" (1.16).

How then shall we respond to the threat of ecological catastrophe and how relate Christian hope to it? In our lead article, Harold Wells ponders the gravity of the threat, the finitude of the creation and the centrality of eschatology to Christianity. In "Does It All End in Beetles?" Linda Yates analyzes the naïvity and romantic cast of much that appears in eco-theology and "evolutionary Christianity." In an epistemological article, Erin Green observes that climate change discourse is altering the

scientific understanding of what counts as knowledge, and compares this development with biblical ways of knowing. Adam Kilner's review article on the *Left Behind* series points out both the popularity and danger of pre-millennial expectation of "the Rapture."

Ecological concern has been a significant feature of Mardi Tindal's personal spirituality and her service in office as moderator and we are glad to have her testimony in "The Heart of the Matter." Ruth Brouwer presents a profile on Donald Faris, one of the pioneers in broadening United Church understanding of mission. Three of our six book reviews focus on the theme of the environment. The others deal with Bill Kervin's reader on United Church worship (*Ordered Liberty*), a congregational study book on the Trinity and the Christian life (*Three Ways of Grace*), and a collection of the sermons of Fred Craddock.

A year ago this September, the obituary of Ray Anderson appeared in *The Economist*. Anderson was a successful entrepreneur who turned "green" and became even more successful. He first was galvanized by the novel idea of making carpet tiles. The company he founded soon became the biggest carpet manufacturer on the planet. But this made his company a big plunderer, since the tiles were made almost entirely of petroleum products. The turning point came in 1994 when he was reading Paul Hawken's *Ecology of Commerce*. As he read its account of the extinction of species, his tears flowed uncontrollably.

Anderson resolved that his company, Interface, would seek to leave no scar on the green-and-blue carpet of Earth. By 2007, its greenhouse gas emissions by absolute tonnage were down 92%, its water usage was down 75% and 74,000 tonnes of used carpet had been recovered from landfills for "post-consumer recycling." And company profits were up by two-thirds. Some sniped at Anderson for doing well by doing good, but senior executives of other companies, like those at Walmart, came to Anderson's Georgia plant to see what he was doing right. Worldly success does lift the profile of a noble cause.

As the United Church embarks upon a new "season of creation" this September, may you be encouraged by this number of *Touchstone*.

Peter Wyatt

CLIMATE HOLOCAUST, MORTAL PLANET, AND *ESCHATON*

by Harold Wells

Could it be that human beings will bring about the “end of the world”—whether through nuclear war or climate catastrophe—and so frustrate the Creator's intention for the world? If Christ were to “come again,” would there be an earth, or a humanity, for him to return to? Or, does God's promise of a good *eschaton*, implicit in Jesus' resurrection, guarantee that no such catastrophe can ever occur? If we are to clarify our Christian eschatological hope for the consummation of God's Reign, these questions must be put into the wider context of what contemporary science can tell us about the probable future of our planet, and indeed of the whole physical universe.

Christians dare to believe, in spite of so much horror, tragedy and sorrow, that we live in a world rich in beauty, love and meaning, the creation of a purposeful Creator. Because of the Christ event, we believe that the Creator has an end-time goal, an *eschaton* for the world, in which God's Reign finally will overcome all evil and death. Hope in the consummation of God's Reign usually comes to the fore in times of great evil and suffering. Theology after the world wars was intensely aware that the world as we know it does not correspond to the goodness of God. The unspeakable carnage of World War I, and the holocaust events of World War II—especially the concentration camps and the nuclear bombing—landed a mighty blow to the modernist faith in progress through reason, science and education. Optimistic utopias, built upon the modern myth of inevitable progress, no longer reassure us of a brighter human future.¹ Today, if we listen to contemporary climate science, hope for salvation through the technological mastery of nature has also been turned on its head. We must now formulate Christian hope in view of yet another possible holocaust.

Climate Holocaust?

Multiple crises face humanity in our new century: a burgeoning

¹ Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope against Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), chapters 1-3.

population, now exceeding seven billion and projected to reach nine billion by mid-century; fierce competition for scarce energy resources in an increasingly industrialized world, the widespread depletion of fresh water aquifers, drastic soil erosion, water and food shortages, the danger of armed conflict over the necessities of life. And closely related to all of these—climate change.²

Large segments of the world population do not believe that climate change is real, or that human beings are causing it. An organized media campaign, largely funded by the coal and oil industries, has succeeded in convincing many people that global warming is a matter of controversy, confusing the public with “balanced” reporting, as though there are two legitimate sides to the question.³ But the scientific consensus is almost universal.⁴ Andrew Weaver, Professor of Earth and Ocean Sciences at the University of Victoria and participant in the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), tells us that between 1965 and 2007, 30,219 peer reviewed articles were published on climate science, commenting: “you can bet that if there were an Achilles heel to the theory of global warming, it would have been discovered long ago.”⁵ The IPCC reports,⁶ of which Weaver is a lead author, are the basis for the international conferences (Kyoto, Copenhagen, Durban) at which national leaders have attempted to negotiate, so far unsuccessfully, an effective plan to limit global warming.

The fourth assessment report of the IPCC was the work of 152 lead authors and more than 600 experts from 113 countries. Panel members assess peer-reviewed science on climate change. In the last major report they asserted that evidence is “unequivocal” that the earth is warming at a dangerous rate.⁷ They also asserted that this is mainly caused by emissions of carbon dioxide (CO₂) from the burning of fossil fuels—coal, oil and natural gas—which create a blanket over the earth's atmosphere, trapping heat which would otherwise exit into outer space. This is

² Lester R. Brown, *World on the Edge* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011).

³ James Hoggan, *Climate Cover-Up* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2009).

⁴ Naomi Oreskes, “Beyond the Ivory Tower: The Scientific Consensus on Climate Change,” *Science*, 306:5702 (2004).

⁵ Andrew Weaver, *Keeping our Cool* (Toronto: Penguin, 2008), 85.

⁶ See the Fourth Report of IPCC at [Http://www.ipcc/reports](http://www.ipcc/reports).

⁷ Ibid.

confirmed by many publications of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences and dozens of books by qualified researchers.⁸ Weaver informs us that, even if we ceased burning fossil fuels today, it would take centuries for the CO₂ to dissipate.⁹ Observations of present conditions and computer models projecting climate trends, as well as paleo-climate records found in layers of ice and deep-sea sediment cores, reveal the power of CO₂ (produced in the past by natural processes over very long periods of time) to generate climate change. The unprecedented rapidity of climate change through the burning of fossil fuels is exacerbated by the destruction of forests, which absorb carbon, and by agriculture, especially the raising of animals and their methane emissions. Global average temperatures of the whole surface of the earth, including the oceans, have already increased by 0.8 degree Celsius above pre-industrial levels.¹⁰

The melting of Arctic ice accelerated dramatically in 2007, beyond the expectations of the most pessimistic climate scientists.¹¹ The Arctic is the most important refrigerator keeping the planet cool, reflecting light and heat back into space (the “albedo effect”). An amplifying feedback of heat occurs when white ice and snow are reduced and more heat is absorbed into both sea and land. A further feedback occurs with the melting of Arctic tundra, which includes huge deposits of methane, also a potent greenhouse gas.¹² Vast deposits of methane ice are found also on the floor of the ocean, which, with the warming of the seas, could bubble forth and greatly accelerate the greenhouse effect.¹³

Increased CO₂ is particularly disturbing in that it contributes to the acidification of the global ocean, which covers 70% of earth's surface. NASA astrophysicist James Hansen informs us that, when CO₂ increases in the air, the ocean absorbs more carbon dioxide and becomes more acidic. Warming and acidification are now killing coral reefs, resulting also in a huge decline of fishing stocks and marine bio-diversity.¹⁴ Most alarming is the recent evidence of the diminishing of ocean plankton, so

⁸ References to the U.S. National Academy of Sciences by Kristin Shrader-Frechette, *What Will Work?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁹ Weaver, 86. See also Tim Flannery, *Here on Earth* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2010), 196.

¹⁰ James Hansen, *Storms of my Grandchildren* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), 70-72.

¹¹ Weaver, 279.

¹² Discussion of tundra by Weaver, 130-131; Hansen, 149.

¹³ Hansen, 149; Alanna Mitchell, *Sea Sick* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2009), 96-97.

¹⁴ Hansen, 165-166; Flannery, 158.

essential for the production of earth's oxygen supply!¹⁵ Potential tipping points for runaway climate change, which would be “out of our hands” and lead to a “point of no return” are: 1) the collapse of the Greenland and West Antarctica ice sheets, melting now at a rate of 100 cubic kilometers per year, contributing greatly to sea-level rise; 2) an increase of carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere (that has grown from 270 parts per million {ppm} in the pre-industrial era, to 387 ppm in 2009, and rising) to 450 ppm; a concentration above 450 ppm would likely increase average global temperature by about 2 degrees C, with disastrous consequences; 3) massive feedback discharges of frozen methane deposits from the seas and tundra.

Hansen argues that, to avoid such a tipping point, the goal should not be 450, but 350 ppm, and that temperature rise, having now increased by 0.8 C above pre-industrial levels, should be kept to a global average of 1 degree C.¹⁶ “Global warming of an average 2 degrees C. or more would make earth as warm as it had been in the Pliocene era, three million years ago. Pliocene warmth caused sea levels to be about twenty-five metres (eighty feet) higher than they are today.”¹⁷ Given the continuing growth of population and industrialization, the low level of public awareness and the reluctance of governments to act, there is little probability that warming will be limited to 1 degree C.

While they agree about the basics, scientists can differ about details, having differing assessments of timing and consequences. Scientist-philosopher Kristin Shrader-Frechette, in her powerfully argued new book, *What Will Work*, makes dramatically clear what can be expected within this century: “If global-average-temperature increases reach 2 - 2.4 degrees Celsius, the IPCC, the 2009 National Academy of Sciences, and the classic UK-government analysis, the Stern Report, argue that 1 in 6 people will be without water, tens-to-hundreds of millions of people will be climate refugees, made homeless by droughts, storms, flooding and sea rise. Part or all of the Amazonian rain forest—the lungs of the planet—will collapse. Billions of people will suffer water shortages by 2080 . . . ”

¹⁵ Mitchell, 25-26.

¹⁶ Hansen, 276, 140-142; 165.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

She goes on to speak of failing crop yields, especially in developing countries, great increases in hunger and starvation, the disappearance of small mountain glaciers and resulting water shortages in many places, sea level rise affecting London, Shanghai, New York, Tokyo, Hong Kong, and many other low lying places. Some scientists speak of disasters as late as 2080; others point to various degrees of deterioration by 2020 and 2050,¹⁸ and to calamities already occurring, in unbearable summer temperatures, increased numbers and intensity of hurricanes, floods, tornadoes and forest fires. Weaver writes in a similar vein of the consequences of “unacceptable” global average warming of 2 degrees C. above pre-industrial levels.¹⁹

It is especially troubling to realize that by far most of the greenhouse gases have been generated by the industrially developed “First World” nations of the West. But it is the poorer peoples of the Global South, who have contributed little to this problem, who will suffer first, and suffer most.

Do such prospects constitute a “holocaust?” They would make World War II look like a walk in the park. Are we really looking at a possible end of human history? Weaver, who is not noted for extreme statements about climate change, speaks of “the destruction of civilization as we know it.”²⁰ The distinguished British geo-physicist James Lovelock warns of a “new dark age later in this century,” with humanity reduced perhaps to 10% of its present numbers, confined to the polar regions and certain islands in the ocean.²¹ Hansen, while not disagreeing with these scenarios, points to the ultimate disaster: “the Venus Syndrome.” Originally an expert on Venus, he speaks of a planet which is now 97% carbon dioxide, but which once was graced by oceans, where a runaway greenhouse effect occurred, with the ocean boiling and evaporating into the atmosphere. Schrader-Frechette argues persuasively that this could still be turned around with a concerted effort to conserve energy, and rapid development of renewable energy.²² But Hansen concludes that if

¹⁸ Flannery, 249, 260.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 11; Weaver, 203, 258.

²⁰ Weaver, 255.

²¹ James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia* (London: James Allen, 2006), 11; *The Vanishing Face of Gaia* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), 79.

²² Schrader-Frechette, chapters 6 & 7.

we continue with business as usual, burning all the remaining coal, oil and gas, including what is extracted from tar sands and tar shale, the Venus Syndrome is a “dead certainty.”²³

We have known for a long time that we are capable of bringing human history to a violent end through nuclear holocaust, and of taking most or all other living creatures with us. Though the fear of nuclear war and nuclear winter has receded in recent years, that eventuality remains possible. Military historian Gwynne Dyer warns that, in the harsh circumstances of drastic climate change, human conflict over territory and resources will be intensified, and that nuclear conflict will be more likely than ever. The two annihilating possibilities may well coincide.²⁴

This, then, is the threatening context within which we are challenged to think again about Christian eschatology.

“Christianity Is Eschatology”

It is difficult to conceive of a coherent good news (gospel) message that omits the promise of a good destiny for God's creation. Thinkers as diverse as Albert Schweitzer, Johannes Weiss, Karl Barth, and Jürgen Moltmann have maintained, in their different ways, that eschatological hope is definitive for biblical faith. Moltmann, who lived through World War II action and was incarcerated in a prisoner of war camp, knew the guilt and despair of a defeated and shamed post-holocaust Germany. It was out of that experience that he recognized the centrality of biblical hope:

From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope . . . The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but is the medium of Christian faith as such, the key in which everything in it is set, the glow that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected new day. Christian faith lives from the raising of the crucified Christ, and strains after the promises of the universal future of Christ.²⁵

²³ Hansen, 236.

²⁴ See Gwynne Dyer, *Climate Wars* (Toronto: Random House, 2009).

²⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. James W. Leitch (London: SCM Press, 1965), 16.

The prophetic hope of the Hebrew Scriptures is always hope for this world, for a reign of peace and justice, of health and plenty (Isaiah 11:3-9, 35:1-7, Micah 4:3-4). It is hope not only for human beings, but also for the natural world in which we are embedded. Isaiah prophesied, “The wilderness will become a fruitful field, and the fruitful field will be deemed a forest” (Isaiah 32:15). Even when, in later centuries, Jewish belief in life beyond death appeared, it was hope not merely for the human soul, but for bodily resurrection (Daniel 12:2-3). Jesus is proclaimed “Messiah” (an eschatological title), fulfilling the hope of the prophets, only because his resurrection signalled that the Reign of God has broken decisively into the world of oppression and death. As the vindication of a righteous martyr, and as a victory over injustice and death, Jesus' resurrection is seen in the New Testament as the inauguration of God's Reign, which is “already and not yet.” Or, to put it differently, the risen Christ is the *prolepsis*, or preview, of God's consummated Kingdom. The church's mission of good news, of justice and peace, is founded upon hope in the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

We shall have to return to biblical eschatology, but first, what can we know from contemporary science about the long term future of the earth and the universe?

Mortal Planet, Finite Universe

Events expected billions of years from now may seem irrelevant compared to the prospect of the imminent, tragic disasters that threaten us. But questions about the ultimate future of the physical world are relevant to any Christian eschatology. Is the world progressing, through an evolutionary *creatio continua*, toward a glorious “Omega point” (as Teilhard de Chardin believed)? Or will this wonderful creation, fertile from the beginning with such beauty, order, and meaning, come to nothing in a final futility?

We might consider first the probable future of our planet from the perspective of physical science. William Stoeger, a theoretical scientist specializing in astrophysics, asserts the vulnerability of earth to catastrophic events capable of destroying life on earth. He points out that craters on the earth, and mass extinctions evident from fossil records, indicate the frequent arrival of celestial objects, large and small. As

recently as 1908 an asteroid of 30-60 metres in diameter actually did crash into Siberia and destroyed everything within 2,150 sq. kilometres. Had it hit a large city, the city would have been totally destroyed. In another category altogether, astronomers know that in 1994 a huge comet hit the giant planet Jupiter, leaving scars larger than the whole planet Earth. Some 65 million years ago a giant asteroid did hit the earth itself, bringing about drastic climate change and “the great extinction,” including the famous end of the dinosaurs. Volcanoes can also be life-threatening to the planet. Further back, about 250 million years ago, an even greater climate change and mass extinction occurred, not as the result of an extra-terrestrial object but of volcanic eruptions and the oxidation of carbon.²⁶ Stoeger points out that, almost certainly, such events will occur again.

Even if life on earth is not destroyed by such calamities, we must recognize that all earthly life, and the planet itself, are mortal. Since the character of the earth depends entirely on its relationship to the sun, what, according to astrophysicists, will eventually happen to our sun? From what is known about the physics of stars, we know that the sun, now in existence for about 5 billion years, will remain about the same for 5 billion more, burning hydrogen at its core. Thereafter, with the hydrogen diminished, the sun is expected to expand and cool and to become a “red giant,” that will envelop the earth and other planets with fire. “We know that other suns have followed this evolutionary path,” says Stoeger, and eventually, “it will do the same, putting an end to our earth as we know it.”²⁷

Earth is a miniscule part of this unimaginably immense universe, and just one of millions of planets, some of which may well nourish life. But the universe as a whole is not eternal, and exhibits no possibility of evolving into a Kingdom of God. This conclusion is based on the second law of thermodynamics, according to which the universe, having begun in a “Big Bang,” is subject to the law of entropy and will eventually run down into disorder. Astrophysicists have proposed two equally bleak

²⁶ William R. Stoeger, S.J.. “Scientific Accounts of Ultimate Catastrophes in our Life-Bearing Universe,” in *The End of the World and the Ends of God*, eds. John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 22-24.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

scenarios: the universe heating up and imploding upon itself, or expanding infinitely, with gradual heat loss. The prospect is either “freeze or fry.”²⁸ John Polkinghorne, theologian and former professor of mathematical physics at Cambridge, tells us that “it is scientifically as sure as it can be, that the cosmos will end either in the dying whimper of decay, or in the big bang of collapse into the melting pot of the big crunch.”²⁹

For the atheist, the final futility of the universe, dissolving ultimately into nothingness, is obvious. For many of us, however, who cherish intimations of God through beauty and love, order and meaning, atheism is unconvincing. Certainly, if we take the biblical message at all seriously, it is impossible to think that God's good creation will come to nothing. Polkinghorne states clearly what is at stake: “If the universe is a creation, it must make sense everlastingly, and so ultimately it must be redeemed from transience and decay.”³⁰

The mortality of the earth and the finitude of the universe imply, theologically, that the created universe is not a fit object of worship. Pantheism (all things are divine) is not an option for Christian faith, since the *kosmos* itself, and we ourselves within it, are subject to violence, decay and death. Nor can we regard the universe as the incarnation, or “the body of God,” as some have suggested,³¹ for the creation as such does not “save” us, and cannot show us a gracious God, nor a good destiny for creation.³²

As for human selves, if they are to be part of this redemption, they must include the continuity of persistent identities beyond death, yet also sufficient discontinuity to ensure freedom from the suffering, sin and mortality of the old creation. We see such continuity and discontinuity in

²⁸ Robert John Russell, “Bodily Resurrection, Eschatology, and Scientific Cosmology: The Mutual Interaction of Christian Theology and Science,” in *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, eds. Ted Peters, Robert John Russell, Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 5-6.

²⁹ John Polkinghorne, “Eschatological Credibility: Emergent and Teleological Processes,” in Peters et al., 47.

³⁰ John Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope and the End of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 148.

³¹ Sallie McFague, *The Body of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

³² Harold Wells, “The Flesh of God: Christological Implications for an Ecological Vision of the World,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 15/1 (1999), 51-68.

the transformed physicality of the risen Jesus, which is our glimpse into our own future eternal life: “Christ being raised from the dead will never die again. Death no longer has dominion over him,” says Paul (Rom. 6:9); “for this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality” (1 Cor. 15:54). Since, as embodied beings, we are integrally part of the earth, our existence is entwined with that of all other creatures. Thus we cannot speak of a new creation for human beings without the new creation of the earth.³³ From all we know today about the mortality of the earth and the finitude of the universe, it is evident that ultimate hope for creation, for us and for all creatures, rests in the eternal God alone.

But what about biblical eschatology itself? Can a rational person today possibly believe in something so fantastic? Has it any credibility at all to contemporary ears?

Biblical Images of *Eschaton*

Biblical depictions of an end-time or *eschaton* are indeed difficult for people educated in a modern scientific world view. Often couched in a pre-modern cosmology, replete with bizarre apocalyptic symbols and codes, they cannot be understood literally as descriptions of what will happen at the end of history. Rather they must be seen as poetic images, works of the human imagination, stammering to describe the indescribable. Just as the infinity and eternity of God cannot be grasped fully by our finite minds; just as the original act of God's creation cannot be envisaged adequately; so also an eschatological event of new creation cannot be described literally. An event that ends history cannot be an event like others in time and space, since it is “an event that happens to all time and space and transforms them into eternity.”³⁴

That images of *eschaton* cannot be understood as literal descriptions is evident in that they differ one from another, though they sometimes combine or overlap. For example, we hear of a great battle with a “lawless one” who finally will be defeated by the coming again of Christ

³³ Jürgen Moltmann, *In the End—the Beginning*, trans. M. Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 151.

³⁴ Bauckham and Hart, 118.

(2 Thess. 2:3-8). This *parousia* (coming, appearing) of Jesus Christ will be marked by the sound of a trumpet, the descent of Jesus from heaven and the resurrection of the dead; those still living will be “caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thess. 4:16-17). The Book of Revelation also imagines a great battle and the coming Christ as warrior and judge, who will destroy the forces of evil, represented as two great beasts (Rev. 13). We read of “a new heaven and a new earth,” and of “the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev. 21:1-2).

In the synoptic gospels, the central image is that of Jesus, the Son of Man, “coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” This appearing is accompanied by a total disruption of the universe as we know it: “The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven and the powers of heaven will be shaken” (Mark 24:29-30). These images, while poetic and imaginative, are not merely “imaginary.” They arise out of the prophetic hope for a transformed world, and out of trust in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. What is imagined is a total transformation of this finite, transient world into a “new creation,” in which God will take up the whole creation to share in God's own eternal life. It would happen not only “synchronously” (all at the same time) to the whole world, but also diachronically (cutting across all ages) to the whole temporal course of creation's history.³⁵ This hope of a new creation can neither be contradicted nor affirmed by science, as though it were a possibility inherent in the universe as we know it. The eschatological hope rests rather upon faith in an eternal One, who will come to a world which is “groaning in labour pains,” to deliver it from its “bondage to decay” (Rom. 8: 21-22). In that event, as Paul proclaims, God will be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28).

Eschatology and Human Agency

An eschatological hope that finally depends on God alone raises questions about the significance of human agency. Is there anything for us to do? The early Paul evidently expected an apocalyptic event in his own lifetime, and believed that “the present form of this world is passing

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

away” (1 Cor. 7:31). If so, why bother about what happens in this world? Paul had to warn the Thessalonians, apparently idle due to their expectation of Christ's imminent return, to continue to work and earn their living (2 Thess. 3:6-13). Apocalyptic preachers in our own time tend to adopt an ideology that virulently rejects the government regulation of “free enterprise” that seems necessary if climate catastrophe is to be avoided. An American preacher, the late Jerry Falwell, declared that “our grandchildren will laugh at those who predicted global warming. We'll be in global cooling by then, if the Lord hasn't returned . . . The whole thing is created to destroy America's free enterprise system and our economic stability.”³⁶

How, then, do we avoid complacency? What can motivate Christians to struggle, indeed to be at the forefront of ecological movements to combat climate change? Theologically, ecological commitment can be rooted in reverence for God's good creation,³⁷ or simply in love for this planet and love for humanity. It can also be based on the Incarnation, since the Word of God became flesh in the human Jesus, implying the eternal significance of the material creation.³⁸ From an eschatological perspective the key concepts are the Reign of God, new creation, and eternal life.

The paradox of God's Reign is that it lies ahead, and yet has already come in the messianic life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is assured, then, by God's grace alone. At the same time, Jesus' disciples are called to serve the growth of that Reign in the here and now. The Kingdom of God grows, “like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches” (Luke 13:18-19). The disciples do not merely wait, but are sent out to preach the Kingdom and heal the sick (Luke 9:2). Parables of Jesus speak of a kingdom growing through human efforts (Matt. 25:13-40; Luke 19:11-27). Christians are called, then, to grow or “build” the Kingdom, and our work in the Lord is “not in vain” (1 Cor. 15:58).

³⁶ Quoted by Bill McKibben, *Earth* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 12.

³⁷ Ross L. Smillie, *Practicing Reverence* (Kelowna, B.C: Copperhouse, 2011).

³⁸ Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 58-60.

Paul speaks similarly of the “new creation” which he awaits; yet “anyone who is in Christ is [already] a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). It is typical of John to speak in the same way of “eternal life,” a quality of existence which begins in the present age. “Anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me [already] has eternal life,” and already has “passed from death to life” (John 5:24). Thus the Kingdom is now, the new creation is now, and eternal life is now. The life of discipleship is not merely waiting, but active service, here and now, of the Kingdom of life, in confrontation with the kingdom of death.

American theologian Kathryn Tanner is particularly eloquent as she laments “a nihilistic sense of the futility of efforts to improve the human situation and conditions of the planet.”³⁹ Eternal life, she insists, is not just otherworldly, in the sense of life after death, or spiritualized in a merely personal attitude. “Instead, eternal life exists now in competition with another potentially all-embracing structure of existence marked by futility and hopelessness . . . Eternal life infiltrates, then, the present world of suffering and oppression, understood as a new pattern or structure of relationships marked by life-giving vitality and renewed purpose.”⁴⁰ Complacency, she insists, is ruled out by “a transcendent present—by the present life in God.” Tanner alludes to possible climate catastrophe when she speaks of the need to draw upon the work of the physical and social sciences, for “action has an urgency; moreover, every moment counts. As scientists describe it, the world does not have an indefinite extension into the future; nor will a second chance for action come again by way of a future reinstatement of the world now suffering loss.”⁴¹

To return to our opening question: Could a human-caused annihilation frustrate the Creator's intention for the earth? Biblical authors frequently depict God lamenting, even weeping, over human sin and folly, and unspeakably evil things happened to God's people, in conquest, exile and crucifixion. In view also of the twentieth century holocausts, we cannot presume that a supernatural *deus ex machina* will save us from either

³⁹ Kathryn Tanner, “Eschatology without a Future?” in Polkinghorne and Welker, 226.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 230-231.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 235.

nuclear or climate catastrophes. We cannot rule out the possibility that human foolishness will result in annihilation, or in a dark age, centuries or millennia in duration. Thus, Christian faith must not be used as a basis for ecological or political complacency. We are called to a vigorous ecological ethic and political action in the service of God's good earth.

Assuredly, however, a final event of resurrection and redemption, cutting across all times and ages, could not be cancelled out by human foolishness, or even by natural calamities. The death of one planet could no more overwhelm the redemptive purpose of the sovereign God than the death of one individual. The decisive events of incarnation and resurrection remain the ground of our unquenchable faith and hope.

DOES IT ALL END IN BEETLES? ECO-THEOLOGY: A MUTATION OF “SCIENCE”

by Linda Yates

It is true that the Harper government has left scientists and science twisting in the wind with defunding and systemic oppression of findings considered problematic for certain industries. Environmentalists and eco-theologians protest this abandonment of science and its insistence on data-gathering based on empirical evidence. This is ironic because eco-theologians and many environmentalists began ignoring scientists and science long ago. Eco-theologians are particularly guilty of the sin of cherry picking “science” in the effort to build a theology that glosses over the nasty bits about nature. This popular theology is being heavily promoted by The United Church of Canada. An example of this is the liturgy for Earth Sunday 2012 recommended to all pastoral charges containing prayers and theology written by Betty Lynn Schwab and Bruce Sanguin.

There is a dismissive response built into eco-theology for anyone who might bring up questions of a scientific nature. A person who holds up peer-reviewed studies or theory to challenge the tenets of eco-theology is called a practitioner of “materialistic scientism.” There are other “isms” to be really worried about, though. Care needs to be taken not to fall into the trap of “naturalism.” Griet Vandermassen claims that we tend to fall into naturalistic fallacies that include:

- The direction of evolution is the direction that we ought to be going.
- What currently exists ought to exist.
- Natural is good.
- Good is identical to its object.
- Good is a natural property.
- You can go from facts to values.
- You can go from “is” to “ought.”¹

¹ Griet Vandermassen, *Who's Afraid of Charles Darwin? Debating Feminism and Evolutionary Theory* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 100-104.

Eco-theology, particularly the subspecies of it known as “evolutionary theology,” might be fine if it actually did what it sets out to do, that is, build a theology based on the science of evolution. It fails in this. The processes and outcomes of evolution are at best misrepresented, and, at worst, distorted, to fit a questionable argument. Because of this, in its quest to find a theology to save the planet, it disregards the very processes that brought our current state of planetary life into being, and thus puts the environment in even greater danger of being abused.

Eco-theology encourages us to think about nature as a model of “balance” that is exemplary and can thus provide us with moral direction. Ironically, in its argumentation, eco-theology becomes even more anthropocentric and eschaton-oriented than orthodox Christian belief. Evolutionary theology is just another variant of Creationism’s more handsome brother, Intelligent Design (ID). ID does not take evolution seriously. Natural adaptation, a key element of evolution, depends on random genetic mutations that occur totally by chance. Evolutionary eco-theology is built upon a framework of worry that the prevalence of chance and accident in our universe precludes meaning, direction and a sense of how it will all end. It soothes this worry by claiming that chance only appears to be chance.

Giving Evolution a Gloss

At first it broke my heart to realize that eco-theology was built upon sand. Some of my favorite feminist heroines have become eco-theologians in their latter years and written important books. These would include Radford Ruether’s *Gaia and God*,² Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza’s *The Power of Naming*³ and Sally McFague’s *Super, Natural, Christians*.⁴ They form the basis for much of the theology found in Sanguin’s books, as well as the eco-theological liturgical material coming from the UCC. There are many more books and a plethora of theologians who have written on the wrestling match between the theology of a good God and Darwin’s theory

² Rosemary R. Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992).

³ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *The Power of Naming: A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology* (New York: SCM Press, 1995).

⁴ Sally McFague, *Super, Natural, Christians* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

of evolution. I am indebted to Lisa Sideris' book, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology and Natural Selection*, for cogently and comprehensively gathering and analyzing most of these. As her title indicates, Sideris is above all interested in environmental ethics.

Sideris' reading of Ruether on natural adaptation is that "Competition only *appears* (sic) to be competition; it is really cooperation, symbiosis and interdependence."⁵ Likewise, McFague claims only to be able to speak in metaphors. For her all reality is a construct, but she uses "facts" to bolster an ethic of nature as indicative of love and interdependency. Sideris observes: "She presents a picture of nature that is scientifically inaccurate and then develops an ethical translation of that picture (love and care for all subjects *as* subjects) only to depart from this ethic when it demands something radically different in our treatment of non-human animals."⁶

Both McFague and Ruether claim the goodness of a beneficent God as evidenced in nature, but fail to take into account the general level of carnage, starvation, competition, predation, parasitism and suffering that has been involved throughout evolution and can still be observed throughout nature—at both macro and microscopic levels. The vast majority of relationships within nature are predatory. Even botanists will tell one that plants do pretty much whatever animals do, only more slowly. Evolution is rife with conflict. James Gustafson points out that, from a Darwinian perspective, interdependence is not the antithesis of conflict. Within nature, there is interdependence without equilibrium.⁷ "Balance" within nature and "community" within nature (concepts considered very outdated by biologists) are constantly held up as a model for the moral behaviour of humans; yet balance does not exist within nature and never has existed there. McFague and Ruether, although claiming to take seriously the reality of evolution, seem to articulate a scientific understanding of nature that is Romantic and pre-Darwinian. According to Sideris, pre-Darwinian naturalists "sought to reanimate the world, to reclaim it from Enlightenment mechanization of nature."⁸

⁵ Lisa Sideris, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 51.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁷ James Gustafson, *A Sense of the Divine* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1994), p. 67.

⁸ Sideris, *Environmental Ethics*, 70.

Another theological stance that seeks to incorporate evolution into an understanding of Deity is that of Jürgen Moltmann. Sideris observes that he interprets the Genesis story as a metaphor for the perfection of creation before evolution. For him, evolution is a process of the Fall. Moltmann believes in a panentheistic God and says: “Whereas simple pantheism makes everything a matter of indifference, panentheism is capable of differentiation. Whereas simple pantheism sees merely eternal, divine presence, panentheism is able to discern future transcendence, evolution and intentionality.”⁹

Sideris says that Moltmann acknowledges the suffering inherent in evolution and adaptation, but believes that at the end of time God will redeem all of creation. Evolution is synonymous with *creatio continua*. We are in an in-between phase after which God will bring about the final stage, *creatio nova*. At this omega point, all struggle, suffering and domination will be removed.¹⁰ In other words, it will all come out in the wash of the eschaton.

Naturalist J.B.S. Haldane famously said, tongue in cheek, that God must have an inordinate fondness for beetles as there are more than 400,000 species of them, as compared with 8000 species of mammals. They clearly are a naturally adaptive success story, rare in nature. Fully 99.9% of all species that ever lived already are extinct. Sanguin correctly has pointed out that evolution has resulted in many dead ends or “dumb” branches. This has happened, according to evolutionary theology, so as to culminate in our current state of “consciousness.” Death happens so that life can happen. But why so *much* death to produce this result? For example, earth’s geological formations record that complex life forms in the ocean and on land have twice been wiped out by overgrowth of microscopic life forms that poisoned the water and the air. These “natural” events were *not* necessary to result in life as we know it on the planet. Could the suffering arising from the suffocation and starvation of creatures in these massive extinctions ever be described as “good”?

The Multiverse Needs No Deity

In tracing the process of evolution back through time to the “Big Bang,”

⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 103.

¹⁰ Sideris, *Environmental Ethics*, 102.

Sanguin builds on the findings of the new theoretical physicists. In its unfolding, he perceives Intelligent Design. Physicists describe our universe as needing to be almost impossibly finely tuned in terms of the number of things that needed to be present, in the exact amount, temperature and timing, for us to exist. Alan Lightman, a physicist explains:

The recognition of this fine tuning led British physicist Brandon Carter to articulate what he called the anthropic principle, which states that the universe must have the parameters it does because we are here to observe it. Actually, the word *anthropic*, from the Greek for “man,” is a misnomer: if these fundamental parameters were much different from what they are, it is not only human beings who would not exist. No life of any kind would exist . . .

Intelligent Design, however is an answer to fine-tuning that does not appeal to most scientists. The multiverse offers another explanation. If there are countless different universes with different properties—for example, some with nuclear forces (within atoms) much stronger than in our universe and some with nuclear forces much weaker—then some of these universes will allow the emergence of life and some will not . . . From the huge range of possible universes predicted by the theories, the fraction of universes with life is undoubtedly small. But that doesn’t matter. We live in one of the universes that permit life because otherwise we wouldn’t be here to ask the question . . . The multiverse offers an explanation to the fine-tuning conundrum that does not require the presence of a Designer.¹¹

Evolutionary eco-theology however, uses the anthropic principle to construct a theism (despite its claims to the contrary) that states a womb-like intelligence designed an unfolding, creative process resulting in us. Anthropism used in the service of ID can very easily lead to

¹¹ Alan P. Lightman, “The Accidental Universe: Science’s Crisis of Faith,” *Harpers Magazine*, December 2011. <http://harpers.org/archive/2011/12/0083720>

anthropocentrism, which got us into this whole environmental mess in the first place. Appealing to this “evolutionary” aspect of an unfolding universe as evidentiary and exemplary does not make us ethical, faithful or even spiritually informed human beings. It merely constructs a theology on the scaffolding of accident, chance and randomness, dressed up to look like the solid ground of direction and purpose.

God at the Centre

Eco-theology and its variant, evolutionary theology, are primarily eschatologically oriented. An example of this eschatological vision is the premise laid out in *Evolution from Creation to New Creation*.¹² Authors Ted Peters and Martinez Hewlett outline a constructive theistic evolutionary approach, debunking Creationism and Intelligent Design and, like Moltmann, invoke the eschaton as the answer to the carnage of evolution:

Our answer to the theodicy question is not a logical one. We do not invoke twists of logic to justify God for creating a world of struggle with survival of the fittest and all its accompanying waste. Rather, we point to God’s promise of resurrection and renewal. Death is not the final chapter in the story of God’s drama with nature. Life is. Eternal life is. This renders theodicy a temporal problem, not an eternal one.¹³

While Peters and Hewlett accord evolution full significance in explaining why we are, and also—to some degree—who we are, this distinction between temporal and eternal realities does not provide a convincing theodicy in the face of natural selection. Saying that things will all be resolved happily in the consummation does not necessarily offer comfort or meaning to someone who is living with, for example, the temporal reality of cancer. Why cancer at all?—because, as Steven James and Leonard Hummel assert, cancer is not so much a by-product of

¹² Ted Peters and Martinez Hewlett, *Evolution from Creation to New Creation: Conflict, Conversation, and Convergence* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 17.

evolution as natural adaptation in its finest form.¹⁴ Chance deformations of replicating DNA create cells that develop extraordinary properties. Usually our bodies recognize and remove them through a variety of defence mechanisms. If we live long enough, sooner or later these will fail. Such random mutations of DNA eventually combine to form a cell that evades detection. These cells grow and organize to the point where they kill their “host.” When thinking about mortality and cancer, it is important to recognize that our bodies are products of millions of years of evolution, and not to idolize natural selection as a good in itself.

What *are* we to think of evolution through natural selection in the purposes of God? Is it enough to regard it, as Peters and Hewitt do, as evidence of the Fall? From an ecological perspective, Sideris observes that this move results in an ethic of “redeeming and restoring nature to conditions that are, in effect, unnatural, and such an ethic can only make things worse for the environment we are trying to save.”¹⁵ Evolution is integral to nature. If we value the natural world, then we must also respect evolution. Evolution does not need to be saved. It does not need to be sanitized or held up as a model for human behavior or spiritual insight. It just needs to be respected.

James Gustafson critiques Western ethics and theology in terms of both its anthropocentrism and its labelling of evolution as the proof that nature is “fallen.” Sideris describes his encouragement of a theocentric theology thus: “Religion is increasingly advanced as instrumental to subjective temporal human ends,” including the desire for “getting on well in the business of living, for resolving those dilemmas that tear individuals and communities apart. And for sustaining moral causes.” Religion is promoted as a means to personal growth, a therapeutic response to anxieties. “One should become liberated from whatever represses or oppresses” according to much of contemporary teaching.¹⁶

Gustafson’s target is “moralistic therapeutic Deism” (Kenda Dean)

¹⁴ Steven W. James and Leonard M. Hummel, “Chance, Necessity and Love: An Evolutionary Theology of Cancer,” Intensive D. Min. course at the Lutheran Seminary at Philadelphia, 25-29 January 2010.

¹⁵ Sideris, 200.

¹⁶ James M. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, Vol. 1 of *Theology and Ethics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), quoted in Sideris, *Environmental Ethics*, 202.

and he criticizes theologies that put God at the service of the interests of a particular community. Gustafson asserts that “God is the other, the ultimate reality, in whom we relate ourselves and all things.”¹⁷ (This stands in direct contrast to Sanguin’s claim that God is not “the other.”) Gustafson argues that when we refuse to acknowledge God’s “otherness,” our decisions and choices cannot be correct because they remain uninformed by the fact that we have not created the natural order as human beings and thus it is not under our control. Further, anthropocentric theology, such as liberation theology and (I would argue) evolutionary eco-theology, lead to decisions that understand “good” as being that which is good for humans as opposed to consideration of the larger whole. For example, some eco-theologians dismiss science outright when presented with peer-reviewed environmental scientific studies countering their particular activist stance. This is an example of putting human concerns (i.e., feelings, aesthetics and trust in self-gathered “junk” science) at the centre of a larger, holistic environmental discussion.

For Gustafson, a theology that places God at the centre supports the perspective of science because the world of science already knows that humans are not the centre of the universe. He maintains we can *participate* in natural processes but we cannot control them.¹⁸ A stance that respects nature is one that involves more humility and a sense of “otherness.” With God at the centre, the response of humans to God becomes one of acknowledgement; of dependence, awe and gratitude.¹⁹ He maintains that respecting natural processes from a theocentric perspective recognizes that evolution “brings us into life and sustains life,” but it also “creates suffering and pain and death.”²⁰

So what are we to do in response to this pain and suffering that is implicit within a natural world governed by the dynamic of evolution? Be grateful, according to Gustafson and Sideris. We are a charismatic and biophilic (nature-loving) species. We bond with one another and we bond with other living organisms. We have the gift of great complexity of thought. “The idea of charismatic species embodies the idea that life-

¹⁷ Gustafson, 195, quoted in Sideris, 203.

¹⁸ Gustafson, quoted in Sideris, 201.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 204.

²⁰ Gustafson, 210, quoted in Sideris, 215.

forms are not only *gifted* but also, in a sense, *gifts*; that is, the term charismatic points to their value and origin and something external to ourselves—*charisma* meaning that which is divinely given.”²¹ And “our understanding and appreciation of natural processes point to the conclusion that we are not the centre of things. This discovery—supported by biological evidence—is itself an important and profound gift, ethically and theologically.”²²

Sideris maintains that love and gratitude are the starting points for determining ethical action when thinking about nature. “A response of gratitude is owed to the natural processes themselves as much as to their products.”²³ In this attitude of gratitude, Sideris, Gustafson and Sanguin would concur.

It appears that the idea of dominion over creation has resulted in a profound attitude of ingratitude. But what if the writers of the Bible were not describing a prescriptive attitude and/or behaviour of stewardship, and instead were describing a preconscious recognition of the power of human beings radically to alter their environment? They were identifying what eco-theology describes. We are conscious and we have great power to do good or evil to the environment. Whether we have the right to be stewards or whether it is a good model for our relationship with the earth or not, we are *de facto* stewards because we now have the power to let live, alter or destroy. On our current path we could conceivably do so much damage that the beetles inherit the earth. As much as God may love beetles, Genesis would seem to indicate God has a different dream for the creation and for us. How it all ends will depend a great deal on what we do with our stewardship and whether we live with theocentric humility. This means accepting that we cannot remake the processes of evolution and natural adaptation in our own image.

²¹ Sideris, 253.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 254.

CLIMATE CHANGE DISCOURSE AND THE BIBLICAL TEMPLATE OF KNOWLEDGE

by Erin Green

“The medium is the message.” This familiar phrase from famed Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan offers an unconventional, yet intriguing, starting point for looking at scriptural wisdom in light of the contemporary challenges of climate change. Very broadly, McLuhan’s words suggest that the platforms used to spread an idea influences how that same idea is received in impressive ways. Whether it is shared through television, social media, word of mouth, or even Scripture, a message’s currency in culture is indebted to the vessels that carry it. These famous words remind us that form and content exist in dynamic interplay; that we must be attentive to the ways in which the medium shapes what we say and how we receive the messages offered by others.

Though McLuhan had his sights on mass communication in early precursors to the digital age, his insight is also worth exploring within the context of theological reasoning. In particular, Christian Scripture is a potent example of how the medium in and of itself can carry a valuable message. In looking at the form of Scripture (i.e., how it is organized, the types of data and information it includes, the ways in which core messages are expressed, and so on) one finds that the Bible offers a vibrant template for contemporary interdisciplinary discourse. This richly textured epistemology found in Scripture emphasizes democratic treatment of data and encourages multifaceted discourse. These features of the Bible are in turn an important source of wisdom and hope in the face of distinctly 21st century challenges.

Theology and Climate Change

Theology has a varied and long history of engagement with the natural sciences. Recent scholarship gives much attention to a handful of important points of contact between the two reasoning strategies.¹ For example, theologians have been concerned with the intersection of

¹ I use the term “reasoning strategies” in lieu of the conventional term “discipline.” The term is meant to capture the permeability among types of human intellectual activity and our shared concerns with problem solving and achieving optimal intelligibility.

scientific cosmologies and Christian thought on creation and eschatology, and the relationship between evolutionary biology and the idea of God as Creator. The contemporary historical challenges of global catastrophic climate change have given rise to another such important moment for theology. The intersection of theological reasoning with the claims emerging from climate-change science is becoming an increasingly popular and worthy area of research.

This intersection is much like other points of contact between theology and science. For instance, research emerging from empirical methods figures prominently in our climate change knowledge base. Claims about changing weather patterns, acidification of Earth's oceans, increasing desertification, greenhouse gas levels, and so on, result from experiment and measurement. However, climate change also differs from other subsets of modern Western science. In its radical impact on biological and cultural life on earth, climate change demands holistic response beyond the capacity of empirical methods. Inextricably bound to the things that can be measured or predicted (e.g., rainfall, sea levels, fossil fuel consumption) are matters that cannot be measured or predicted (e.g., the value of human life and culture, the overall role of a given species in an ecosystem, or even the long-term relationship between the results of climate change and civil and trans-national war). In this way climate change provides an atypical intersection of theology and science. In climate change discourse the scientific, political, ethical, and theological are all entangled.

Conventional treatment of Scripture in both academic and popular theological writing on climate change typically focusses on the content of biblical messages. Central themes usually challenge rapacious and destructive personal and corporate behaviour. For example, Christian theologians often re-work interpretations of stewardship or dominion, moving from justifying the subjugation of ecosystems and oppression of peoples to emphasizing responsibility and inter-connectedness. Other approaches to biblical engagement with climate change include highlighting the Genesis dictate that all of creation is good. This serves to deflate anthropocentrism and heighten the intrinsic dignity of the whole of the created order. These messages of Scripture are invaluable sources for theologians interested in dismantling structures that lend support to

global catastrophic climate change. Here the appeal to biblical messages focusses on prophetic voices challenging the *status quo* or Jesus as exemplar of speaking truth to power. The common thread in such theological responses to climate change is the emphasis on the content of a message, rather than its form.

Scriptural Forms: An Eclectic Mix

This overarching approach, based on scriptural mandates, is indispensable. The challenging messages laced throughout Scripture, and the thoughtful exposition of them, calls people of faith toward ever more healthy relationships with one another and all of the created order. These biblical principles generate good, transforming work. They offer guidance to our churches in their theological reflections and often form the bedrock of denominational and ecumenical policy work on climate change. The treatment of Scripture outlined below complements and does not displace these important readings. Inspired by McLuhan's attention to the influence of the medium, I will peel back the layers of messages and look at how the structure of Scripture itself is a source of wisdom and hope in theological approaches to climate change.

The biblical template for interacting with, and making sense of, the world is very robust. It holds together an impressively eclectic mix of data, information and knowledge, and, through this complex, resists wholesale characterization. There is no one kind of scriptural data; no singular pattern within its varied books. This impressive vibrancy suggests that our contemporary theological reasoning, and our efforts to bring theology into closer contact with other reasoning strategies, should be equally enlivened.

Even a cursory glance at the biblical record reveals a highly textured pattern for knowing. This texture includes things like measurement and instruction, as seen in the account of the building of Noah's ark; the enumeration and census work found throughout the Book of Numbers; the familiar arcs and rhythms of famous passages of prose (e.g., the narrative of Adam and Eve in Eden or the accounts of Jesus' birth). There is also the evocative poetry of the Psalms, the collection of epistles in the Second Testament, the plural parallel perspectives of the synoptic Gospels, and frequent use of genealogy. Of course, in all of this,

there is also a place for rules and ethical principles like those outlined in the Ten Commandments or the Holiness Code found in Leviticus. One could go on to find several other kinds of data, information, and knowledge in Scripture.

So what does this suggest? Ultimately, this diversity of ways of interacting with and making sense of the world argues for a democratic and multi-faceted epistemology. There is no real privileging of one kind of information over another. Rather, Scripture calls its readers to reflect upon how these forms of expression are held together as an authoritative whole. Prose does not take precedence over poetry, nor narrative over genealogy. Sparser, more descriptive sections are held up as valuable right alongside the most evocative and memorable passages. Even when a story is told more than once, it is repeated with a fresh voice or drawn from a different historical context. This is evidenced in the parallels among Matthew, Mark, and Luke, or the differences between the creation stories in Genesis, or the layering of editorial voices in the Pentateuch. The wisdom of revelation and history weaves together a canon that values plurality in discourse, and diversity in our sources of knowledge. In this view, understanding ourselves, God, the world and all the relationships therein, requires multiple sources of data, information, and knowledge that relate together interactively.

Diverse Sources of Knowledge for the Climate Change Challenge

This biblical template of knowing proves invaluable for the interdisciplinary concerns at hand. As noted above, the climate change intersection is both similar and different than traditional intersections between theology and scientific reasoning. A key difference is that the problems of climate change are not simply unsolved scientific questions or contested hypotheses that can be resolved with enough experimentation or theorizing. Rather the problems tabled by climate change are ethical, political, theological, and scientific all at once and their resolution is far from an historical certainty. The direct links among changes in Earth's water, land, and atmosphere, and issues related to all manner of flourishing and oppression, guarantee that climate change can never be merely an object of scientific study. Instead it demands contributions and analysis from far-reaching fields, forcing us to re-evaluate the boundaries

of conventional scientific discourse. Therefore, the scope of acceptable data, information, and knowledge must be broadened for the sake of adequately addressing the problems of climate change. In this sense, climate change discourse has the potential to embody the kind of textured, multi-faceted epistemology exemplified in Scripture.

As global catastrophic climate change reaches deeper into popular consciousness, conversations about related issues come to include more and more perspectives. Scientists, policy and law makers, denominational and ecumenical justice bodies, civil society groups, and any number of conventional academic disciplines (systematic and biblical theology included) are all weighing in on how best to understand and respond to climate change. With increasing numbers of impacts—ecological and otherwise—come increasing numbers of stakeholders. Finally, too, these conversations are beginning to welcome contributions from the margins. The wisdom of those most vulnerable to the effects of climate change is tentatively welcomed to the chorus. The insights of environmental refugees and victims of natural disasters, indigenous peoples, and those living on precariously situated lands are finally being added to the complement of climate change data, information, and knowledge.

The canon of climate change discourse continues to grow and evolve. Of course, classical scientific data and information necessarily figure prominently. Ongoing scientific observation of sea levels, rainfall levels, desertification, tropical storm frequency and strength, and so on yield pictures of a world that is changing . . . and changing fast. The enumeration and census work of both human and non-human species also finds its place in this sphere. For example, the movement of hundreds of thousands of people in the Sudan away from lands affected by desertification toward pastoral lands is a compelling vignette. This large scale shift in population proved to be a potential flashpoint for warfare in an already fragile political landscape. Population data and information about non-human species is also important. For example, the collapse of bee colonies and fisheries, the lengthening and shifting patterns of migratory species, and the extinction of species, function as indispensable contributions to climate change discourse.

The diversity of authoritative climate change data is again enriched when people add narrative data and information to the mix. Surely each

person reading this article has had a conversation with another about an early frost, an unbearable heat wave, a remarkably snowless Canadian winter, or another similarly “the times they are a-changin’” anecdote. The important social currency of weather-based talk embeds in climate change discourse a certain folksy, narrative quality. The immediate and visceral quality of our experience of climate presses us toward constant engagement with it.

On a grander and perhaps more meaningful scale, stories again find their place in climate change discourse when data, information, and knowledge from indigenous and traditional peoples are considered. Contributions from these sources often come in the form of historical adaptation strategies and first-person accounts of how climate change affects life and culture. Examples include accounts of “traditional farming techniques” that are marked by pre-industrial adaptation strategies, of “changing hunting and gathering periods and habits,” and insight into what kinds of “crop and livelihood diversification” work in the face of climate change.² A 2008 International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) report supports increased authority for marginalized indigenous and traditional voices in the face of global catastrophic climate change. The report argues that the “social and biophysical vulnerability” borne by the world’s indigenous and traditional peoples results in a privileged epistemological standpoint.³ A greater role for data, information, and knowledge drawn from these cultures in scientific discourse about climate change stands only to democratize and enrich our ways of making intelligible very complex problems.

Climate change discourse can be again enhanced through a multimedia element. In particular, photojournalism and documentary filmmaking have taken up themes relating to climate change. Contributions from these spheres often elicit powerful, visceral reactions. The heartbreaking footage of a lone polar bear exhausted and swimming further and further out into an iceless sea in a *Planet Earth* documentary is peerless in its impact. Ed Burtynsky’s enormously popular *Manufactured Landscapes* (both film and photographic incarnations) and

² M. Macchi (March 2008). “Indigenous and Traditional Peoples and Climate Change,” Issues Paper (Gland, Switzerland: International Union for Conservation of Nature), 5.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

Davis Guggenheim's 2006 documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, are two further examples of multimedia engagement with climate change that have had broad public influence.

The description of biblical data, information, and knowledge above reveals a medium with a multifaceted epistemology. Christian Scripture calls us as people of faith to experience, describe, and make intelligible the world through multiple forms of expression. It also calls us to account for shared experiences through multiple perspectives. This rich interweaving of prose, poetry, census, measurement, narrative, law, and so on, is the scriptural template for human knowing. The biblical medium indicates that our engagement with the world is incomplete when we prize one kind of expression above others or when we allow a homogenous voice to speak for a heterogeneous whole.

The Relevance of the Bible's Eclecticism

It is difficult to find notes of hope in climate change discourse. As species slip into extinction, weather patterns become increasingly unpredictable, and consumption grows nearly unabated, it seems as though climate change is a supremely intractable crisis. However, the complexity of the problem appears also to open the way for discourse based on the biblical principles outlined above. On the whole, the problems of climate change demand the kind of multi-faceted, multi-perspectival approach to engagement with the world found in Scripture. In both biblical and climate change discourse, the appetite to make the world intelligible is satisfied only when plural forms of data, information, and knowledge are brought together in a dynamic whole. For climate change this means drawing in contributions from conventional scientific research, narrative, art, interdisciplinary research, policy and law, and more. As the IUCN report indicates, along with echoes from many civil society and ecumenical justice bodies, the problem of climate change mandates a layering of multiple perspectives. Particularly valuable are contributions from those whose lands and lives are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Ultimately, the pressing global crisis of climate change is perhaps also pressing humankind toward the multi-faceted and dynamic epistemology laid out in the scriptural template thousands of years ago.

The comparison of the scriptural approach to engagement with the

world and that found in contemporary climate change discourse is not without limitations. A critical difference between Scripture and the canons of climate change discourse is the completeness of the data, information, and knowledge within. Unlike the closed quality of Christian canons, the multiplicity of data, information, and knowledge within climate change discourse is unbounded, and not negotiated within any specific community. Christian commitment guides us to wrestle with difficult parts of Scripture rather than attempting to excise them. In contrast, when looking at the scope of scientific discourse, it may be a legitimate methodological move to jettison views that are incongruous with personal, denominational, or other group values. For example, global warming denial does not necessarily have to be embraced as part of the plurality of perspectives within climate change discourse. The canon of climate change discourse is very much open.

At this challenging interdisciplinary intersection, where theology wrestles with understanding and responding to climate change, there is in fact much hope. The pervasive crises of climate change might precipitate radical transformation not only in our ways of behaving, but also in our ways of knowing. The multifaceted demands of climate change—scientific, political, ethical, and theological—might also be a flashpoint for transformation of how we try to make the world intelligible. Climate change presents an opportunity to re-evaluate the privileging of one kind of data, information, or knowledge over others. It is also an opportunity to work toward a holistic way of engaging historical challenges that better mirrors the biblical model. This transformed way of knowing, borne out of crises, is better suited to honour the diversity that is already at play in our world. It sees all knowledge as partial, but not necessarily dispensable. Instead, these partial perspectives best serve one another when we struggle to bring them together in ever more intelligible and complete narratives about our world.

FROM THE HEART—ABOUT THE HEART OF THE MATTER

by Mardi Tindal

I have the soul of a farmer's daughter. My earliest memories include following my father's plow across the fields of our family farm to collect the worms revealed in the fresh-turned earth; watching my grandfather hoe his large garden on early summer mornings; helping my mother and grandmother pick berries, shell peas and prepare food as we discussed matters of church and world.

In the years since, like many of us, I have become an urban adult. I recall those early years now, not with nostalgia, but with a fresh respect for the way in which my parents and grandparents lived with greater balance within the rest of the natural community. We can't go back, but we are learning anew that we must go forward—"to live with respect in Creation," as our United Church creed puts it, and, as our Song of Faith says, "by grace rather than entitlement, for we are called to be a blessing to the earth." Protecting the integrity of creation is, I believe, the greatest spiritual and moral challenge facing us, and all other challenges take their place and become clearer within its context. We cannot achieve social justice or peace, for instance, unless humanity has a home with capacity to support physical life for all. Our action and inaction today threatens the viability of a planetary home for the human family.

When I was in my twenties, I had the privilege of serving as a member of the General Council Task Group on the Environment. Its report represents an important part of *my* faith story and of *our* faith story. I remain astounded by its theological power. Then, in 1977, as a Church, we said that environmental problems are symptoms of a more fundamental crisis in the way our human economy defines growth. We said that we need to live within God's economy instead of trying to manipulate natural limits; that we need to live into biblical wisdom about the prophetic linkage between a healthy natural order and justice among people.

We proclaimed:

In order to love each other,
We have to love the garden;
In order to love the garden,
We have to love each other.

In the context of Jesus' description of the greatest commandment, we must confess that we have *not* loved God, garden and one another as we must, and we have learned painfully that the ways in which we honour or exploit one another are linked directly to the ways in which we honour or exploit the garden.

During my term as moderator I have invited us to deeper participation in God's healing of soul, community and creation, guided by Jesus' description of the greatest commandment and by words of our Song of Faith.

In grateful response to God's abundant love,
we bear in mind our integral connection
to the earth and one another;
we participate in God's work of healing and mending creation.

The heart-breaking legacy of residential schools provides a vivid and painful example of what happens when we fail to honour such integral connections. We remember that just a couple of generations ago our church's role in residential schools was something we celebrated and promoted; now we face a long-term process of living into apology. Over a decade ago, as we were becoming fully aware of the residential schools tragedy, my spouse and I sat at our kitchen table and asked ourselves, "How could they not have seen? Why didn't they change?" And then we asked ourselves: "What is it that our children will look back on, a generation hence, and ask, 'How could *they* not have seen? Why didn't *they* change?'"

Our answer came instantly, rooted in regular recitation of God's call to live with respect in creation. How can we not see, even today, that our ways are not sustainable and represent a rejection of faith? The environmental crisis is the most critical test we have ever faced as people

of faith. If we destroy God's creation, we can make no pretence that we are obeying God's greatest commandment.

This much seemed obvious to us a decade ago. What has taken more time to appreciate since are the subtle ways in which the issues are linked. Living with respect in creation implies respecting all of God's creation, including all cultures, all faiths, all species. At the very least, living with humble respect in creation could have opened our eyes to the arrogance of the residential schools enterprise.

So, today, in the hope of reconciliation for what has been, and in the hope for a restoration of right relationship in our lives ahead, it has become urgent that we return to questions such as:

How will we love God and garden in order to love each other?

How will we love each other in order to love God and garden?

These become questions affecting not just the integrity of creation, but also our personal integrity as disciples, and the integrity of our church as a body of faithful witness. Our love of God, garden and one another depends on how we take such questions into our hearts. It is time for a renewed covenant with God, with one another, and with the garden.

Jesus taught that God is found in wholeness within, as well as wholeness beyond, our own skin. Integrity takes shape by listening deeply to our own true stories of God's presence in our lives, to our own true communal stories and to God's call *today*. And we must honour a diversity of loving responses to the world's challenging realities.

Some see this as a time of scarcity and restraint, but the truth is that we still are blessed with abundant capacities. We can work through our challenges together in order to weave integrity in our lives and in Earth itself.

The Judeo-Christian narrative of creation, as the theologian Walter Brueggemann has written, begins with a "liturgy of abundance," that we have turned into a lament of scarcity. Brueggemann writes:

The conflict between the narratives of abundance and of scarcity is the defining problem confronting us at the turn of the millennium . . . the story of abundance says that our lives

will end in God, and that this well-being cannot be taken from us. In the words of St. Paul, neither life nor death nor angels nor principalities nor things—nothing can separate us from God. What we know about our beginnings and our endings, then, creates a different kind of present tense for us. We can live according to an ethic whereby we are not driven, controlled, anxious, frantic or greedy, precisely because we are sufficiently at home and at peace to care about others as we have been cared for.¹

In God's economy no one needs to endure scarcity so that others might have abundance. The offer of abundance is for all.

I am told that there are some who view the devastating consequences of climate and ocean change as an opportunity for Christ to “purge all sin from His creation to make all things new”² with reference to Revelation 21:1. However, my life-long experience of a loving God has been grounded in Christ who promises and provides abundant life, enabling us to overcome fear in favour of faithful response.

God's call to us is a “still, small voice,” easily overlooked in the shouting of debate and accusation. As Parker Palmer has written in *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, the soul is that grounded place where our fears are overcome. We are people of soul, community and creation. The environmental movement is longing for the spiritual resources which we offer.

I spent Holy Week this year as a participant in a high level United Nations meeting on “Wellbeing & Happiness: Defining a New Economic Paradigm.” The meeting was convened by the Prime Minister of Bhutan, who invited me to serve as a spiritual leader at the gathering, joining Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist leaders. In his letter of invitation to me, Prime Minister Thinley said it was important to have spiritual leaders participating in the meeting:

The experts, economists and scholars, including Nobel

¹ Walter Brueggemann, “The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity,” *The Christian Century*, March 24-31, 1999.

² Marci McDonald, *The Armageddon Factor: The Rise of Christian Nationalism in Canada* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2010), 187.

Laureates, who will join us on April 2nd can only do so much. We need another dimension . . . by reaching deeply into our hearts, and by summoning the love, compassion and care for our fellow beings without which no amount of tinkering with policies, structures, and regulatory mechanisms will be effective.

While Jigmi Thinley and I come from different faith traditions, I agree with him because I am a follower of Christ who commands me to love God and neighbour—all of my neighbours in our own planetary home. Reinhold Niebuhr's words offer perspective and strength:

Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love.³

Today's spiritual and moral challenge to care for God's good earth and one another requires us to live up to our calling to be people of hope, faith and love.

³ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 63.

PROFILE

Faith in Development: Donald K. Faris' Path to a New Mission by Ruth Compton Brouwer



During the 1960s, The United Church of Canada and other mainstream denominations increasingly involved themselves in development in the non-Western world, and missions were often referred to as faith-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Conversely, much early secular development work drew on the legacies, and, sometimes, the personnel, of missions. The career of the Rev. Donald K. Faris (1898-1974) illustrates the latter pattern. Although Faris began his overseas service as a United Church of Canada missionary, after the Second World War, his work was mainly with United Nations agencies. Moreover, his book, *To Plow with Hope*, was an important stimulus for the founding in 1961 of CUSO (originally Canadian University Service Overseas), the first distinctively Canadian NGO to undertake development work from a secular stance and in a context of rapid decolonization. Faris' understanding of mission and his youthful Christian faith informed his early approach to development. As he moved out of the orbit of his church's mission board and into the not always congenial environment of UN agencies and large-scale secular initiatives in the non-Western world, his understanding of mission began to change.¹

One of four children born into a farm family near Bradford, Ontario, Faris studied arts and theology at Queen's University, graduating in 1923. His involvement with the Student Christian Movement had an early and permanently broadening influence on his attitude to matters of faith. Before leaving for China in 1925, he served in a challenging mission in British Columbia. There he met and married Marion Fisher, a

¹ Unless otherwise shown, information for this profile comes from correspondence and other papers shared by the family of Donald K. Faris. The papers include an unpublished memoir, "A Man Before His Time," begun by Don but completed by his wife, Marion. Materials cited from the Faris Collection begin with a reference to this document. For a longer account and fuller references, see Brouwer, "Faith in Development: Donald K. Faris' Path to a New Mission in the Postcolonial Era," *Historical Papers 2011/Canadian Society of Church History*.

minister's daughter and public health nurse, who, over time, pursued an increasingly non-traditional expression of faith.

Faris was appointed to the United Church's North China mission (formerly the North Honan Mission of The Presbyterian Church in Canada). Agriculture emerged early on as a strong interest, notwithstanding his ordination and his appointment to evangelistic work. Political and social upheaval in inter-war China exacerbated the routine poverty and malnutrition that marked the lives of the rural masses among whom the missionaries worked. Although he was stung when he saw his name included in a printed diatribe against foreigners during his first term, Faris was led to ponder whether it was adequate or even appropriate to preach God's love to people experiencing such hardship. As the son of an innovative farmer, he had seen the difference that sound agricultural practices could make in improving crop yields. He had also, perhaps, found something of a role model in Sam Higginbottom, founder of the Allahabad Agricultural Institute in India, whom he had met at a Student Volunteer Movement conference in 1919. Faris' farming initiatives during his first term were undertaken mainly as a hobby, but, on furlough in 1932-33, he spent a good deal of time at agricultural schools and experimental farms—the better to practise a rural social gospel on his return to China.

During his second missionary term, agricultural experimentation and rural community improvement became Faris' priorities, despite the constraints placed on all mission work by the Depression. The multi-faceted programme of rural reconstruction conducted by Faris and his colleagues won strong official and popular support locally, and was encouraged as a model for a wider rural programme by the Church of Christ in China. Although Japanese forces occupied Honan in 1937, the mission's rural work carried on until most mission personnel were evacuated in 1939.

Amidst the chaos, the grafting of some 1500 peach trees onto local stock and their distribution to village cooperatives was perhaps its most enduring physical legacy. Faris remained in China for three more years as Director of the Rural Institute of Cheeloo University in Tsinan. Despite the uncertainty of the political situation he became absorbed in his new work. As had been the case at the mission, he was deeply interested at

Cheeloo in trying out new means for improving the diet of malnourished peasants as well as training young Chinese agricultural workers. He returned to Canada in June 1942 in an exchange of wartime detainees. This marked the end of his career as a missionary.²

Faris had no inclination to seek an ordinary pastoral charge. Instead, he spent most of the last two years of the war as an RCAF chaplain in British Columbia, his family's home province. Then, even before the war was over, he applied for a position with UNRRA, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. Autumn 1945 found him on his way back to China to work on a major land reclamation project on a portion of the Yellow River in Honan. The project occupied him for the next two years. Like other missionaries engaged by UNRRA and other UN agencies in the immediate post-war years, Faris probably was hired mainly for his language ability and local cultural expertise, though his initial assignment evidently also called for engineering skills. He chiefly functioned as an expeditor of supplies for the thousands of labourers employed on the project and as a liaison between the Nationalist and Communist forces who controlled different parts of the region and whose leaders had agreed to cease fighting when the reclamation project began. As the months passed and the agreement broke down, he frequently found himself caught in the crossfire between the rival forces.

Faris would serve on three more UN projects, all of them involving varying degrees of challenge and frustration, before working in India on his final and most satisfying UN assignment. Meanwhile, however, in 1949-50, he sought to return to China under the United Church's Overseas Mission Board (OMB). He hoped that in spite of the Communist triumph he would be able to go back to agricultural extension work at Cheeloo University under OMB auspices. However, there were several things working against his plan, particularly the Cold War context and his strong views about the need for a wholly new approach to missions in the postwar world. He had had tense relations with the

² Faris, "The Year in Honan/An Agricultural Triumph," *New Outlook*, 30 Dec. 1936, 1216; "Honan Carries on Rural Programme," and "The Honan Mission Rural Programme," *United Church Observer*, 15 May and 15 July 1939, 6, 29, and 7, 28; also "Man Before His Time," Faris Collection, and Margaret Brown, "History of the Honan (North China) Mission of the United Church of Canada . . . 1887-1951," available on microfilm, United Church of Canada Archives (UCA), Toronto.

Mission Board secretary, Jesse Arnup, since 1948, when, speaking to various non-church groups about his UNRRA work, he had seemed to Arnup and other concerned churchmen to be unduly critical of Chiang Kai-shek, and sympathetic to Communism, like fellow China missionary, Jim Endicott. Once, he was accused of being a Communist masquerading in a UNRRA uniform. (Later, suspicions about his political leanings briefly resulted in denial of entry to the U.S.) Arnup's recently retired predecessor at the OMB had written to Faris in January 1948, pleading with him to refrain from giving speeches of a political nature. Faris believed that he was being censored by the OMB, which, in contrast to secular organizations, had provided him with few opportunities to speak about China and his UNRRA work.

In 1949, having returned from a UNICEF relief assignment in Hankow, where he had seen much that was troublesome about the ruthlessness of the Communists' tactics as they extended their control, Faris was more conciliatory in writing to Arnup than he had been earlier. While he had temporary work at the United Church's new lay training centre at Naramata, he was mindful of his, and his family's, uncertain future. His preference, he now told Arnup, had always been to serve in China under church rather than UN auspices; he had taken the UNRRA assignment only to have employment. Still, he was concerned that the church's mission policy was not in keeping with new world conditions and that the approach to overseas work that he favoured would put him out of step with the home church. "These are days of great and drastic changes in the world and there must be matching changes in mission policy and the concept of mission work," he wrote.³

Faris got as far as Hong Kong at the end of 1950. Along with OMB sponsorship, he had support from Vancouver-area ministers and their congregations in obtaining supplies for his work, and he had obtained numerous fruit trees from the Dominion Experimental Farm. But any hope that the door to mainland China would re-open was dashed when China entered the Korean War. With no possibility of getting back to Cheeloo, Faris sailed from Hong Kong to India at his own expense, arranging to leave his cherished fruit trees at the Allahabad Agricultural Institute. This seems to have been the place where Faris was most anxious

³ Faris to Arnup, 5 and 16 Aug. 1949 (quotation in second letter), Faris Collection.

to find employment, but he also travelled elsewhere in India and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), vainly seeking an agricultural assignment, whether under mission, UN, or Colombo Plan auspices.

The Hong Kong-India period (early 1951) was a low point in Faris' career and effectively the end of his working relationship with the OMB. In a letter to his son, Ken, early in 1951, he wrote that the church seemed to have no place for his concept of mission: "It forces me to a conclusion . . . that my best contribution to the world now, perhaps, is outside the church organization . . . This exodus from China and growing sentiment in all countries of the world has in it factors that make the older concept of missions a complete impossibility." In time, he believed, the church would recognize its responsibility to aid the world's poor and face its new mission with vision and courage. And while that task was certainly far too vast for the church alone, "It must always be in the forefront in the inspiration of such programs."⁴

Faris assured Ken that his decision to seek international service outside the church felt like God's leading, and, following his disappointments in China and India in 1950-51, he was not long without work. His new assignment, with the United Nations Korean Reconstruction Agency (UNKRA), began promisingly but ended unhappily in the fall of 1953, when, like a number of other senior UNKRA staff, he suddenly found his position terminated. He had briefly been optimistic about support for a multi-faceted programme of rural and community development work, for which he had been assigned responsibility, but, instead, the new military head of the agency implemented a top-down, industrial model for rebuilding Korea. Beyond the administrative problems within UNKRA (three major reorganizations in just over a year), Faris experienced personal unease: periodic concern, such as he had had in UNRRA, that he might be beyond his depth technically; a professional/cultural milieu far removed from the close and homogeneous mission community that had formed his interwar world; and, relatedly, Western colleagues who lacked a desire to understand indigenous cultural values.

Nevertheless, the unhappy end to his Korea assignment proved to be the opening of a door to Faris' most productive venture, the research

⁴ Faris to son Ken from Hong Kong, 5 Feb. 1951, Faris Collection.

that resulted in *To Plow with Hope*.⁵ Faris did not begin his research with a book in mind; he simply wanted to improve his own knowledge about possibilities for technical assistance in the developing world. He was particularly interested in learning more about community development, since that was the approach for which he had had high aspirations in Korea. His research was still ongoing when he took up his UNESCO assignment in Thailand in 1955. Published in 1958, his book, *To Plow with Hope*, illustrated the extent to which Faris' interest in development both reflected and superseded his Christian mission background. The first part of the book employs a literary device familiar to anyone acquainted with didactic mission literature: the use of an individual character to personify a "before" and "after" experience of change among impoverished non-Western peoples. But, whereas in the traditional mission genre the redemptive agent for transformation was conversion to Christianity, to which dramatic physical and cultural improvements were ascribed, in Faris' book, the character "Old Man Peasant" and his family suffer from poverty, sickness, illiteracy, and other problems, none of them attributed to a particular faith identity. In the Epilogue, "Old Man Peasant" is shown to have made modest improvements in his family's well being with assistance from two friendly development workers who come to his village and help him to acquire functional literacy. He can now read simple but helpful manuals, and he can check the records of the money-lender. He is also hopeful that he can spare his one surviving son to attend school rather than work full time on the land.

In the second part of his book Faris provides factual information about the range of development activities being undertaken by national, multilateral, and voluntary agencies. In the final and most personal section, written with the Cold War context in mind, he urges the value of assistance to under-developed countries as a better investment than armaments and as a particularly compelling obligation for "the 800 million people who call themselves Christian." If even a tenth of them meant it when they talked about Christian love, he writes, why had they so far proven so impotent in the face of such obvious need? Jesus' parables "spoke of the fruits of a man's living as the one way of judging whether his life was good [and] . . . as the ultimate criterion for entering

⁵ Donald K. Faris, *To Plow with Hope* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958).

the Kingdom. Only thus does our religion come alive—not in words but in deeds.” This part of Faris’ message was obviously addressed to a Christian readership, but he made it clear that “the forces of regeneration” in Asia and Africa were not exclusively Christian; they included Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and others working alongside Christians, “all in their own way obeying the imperative of love. In this brotherhood of man all barriers are down; no lines are drawn.” Thus expressed, “our own religious insight becomes adult.”⁶

With its straightforward mix of empathy, practical information, and idealism, *To Plow with Hope* appeared at a timely moment. It struck a chord among many people for whom practical idealism rather than either religious duty or calculating Cold War pragmatism was the chief motivation for assisting the de-colonizing world. The most gratifying aspect of the book’s reception was the role it played in inspiring the students who became the first wave of CUSO volunteers. In its final pages, Faris issues a special call to young adults: “Our youth possess a tremendous potential of energy, idealism and enthusiasm just waiting to be tapped. The one re-agent needed is the challenge that life’s fullest expression is found in serving others.” After drawing a parallel with the youth whose idealism had led them to serve in the recent world war, Faris added: “If, in addition to technical skills, these junior experts were equipped with humility and courage, with sincerity and wisdom, they would be able to transmit not only physical satisfactions to the needy but also lasting values such as friendship, goodwill and understanding.”⁷

Faris was still living in Thailand when *To Plow with Hope* was published. Back in Canada, one of the book’s most ardent admirers was Keith Spicer, a young political science graduate student at the University of Toronto. It was Spicer who organized the pioneer group of volunteers who came to be considered the first CUSO cohort. Not only did Faris see that his book was a source of inspiration to Spicer and other young Canadians—and this before the founding of the US Peace Corps, he was also able to observe the volunteers in action. In India with UNICEF from 1960 to 1966, he and Marion played host, sometimes for weeks at a time, to dozens of CUSO volunteers who came to their home to recuperate

⁶ Ibid., 201, 203, for quotations.

⁷ Ibid., 202-03.

from illnesses and enjoy holiday time. This richly rewarding experience of engaging with the CUSO volunteers came as a bonus to his India assignment. With UNICEF, Don Faris was finally able to implement over a sustained period projects that reflected his decades-long interest in assisting rural people. The Applied Nutrition Programme (ANP), as the project was called, proved to be the most satisfying of all Faris' overseas assignments. Sponsored by UNICEF, but conducted in conjunction with India's Planning Commission, the ANP aimed to improve the diet of villagers by increasing the growth and availability of suitable crops, especially with a view to improving maternal and infant health. To that end, Faris travelled to hundreds of villages to win local support and determine the kinds of supplies that would be most useful in a given region. Immensely challenging physically, as well deeply satisfying, the assignment probably worsened the health problems that should logically have prevented Faris from undertaking this final overseas assignment.

In fact, the India assignment almost hadn't happened. Following his return from Thailand in 1959 and worried that there would be no further opportunities to work overseas, Faris, by then in his early sixties, had applied for and was about to accept a church placement in Vancouver. He had put his name forward to the B.C. Settlement Committee with reluctance, since, in the words of his memoir, "my faith had been slipping, although I found that hard to admit even to myself."⁸ It was a pragmatic step, taken with a view to the need to prepare for retirement. But then came the UNICEF offer. Despite health problems so serious that the UN's medical specialists recommended against his appointment, he determinedly accepted the assignment, correctly anticipating that it would climax his overseas career.

Don Faris arguably remained a missionary at heart, not in the sense of a desire to proselytize for the Christian religion but rather in his zeal to model its essence by contributing to humanitarian work in the developing world. I suspect that it would have made little difference to Faris whether his years of service in Asia had been undertaken under mission or secular auspices so long as he was granted the freedom to do village-focused work that he deemed to be of the most direct and immediate value to the poor. While he certainly became critical of the "outdated perspectives" of

⁸ Faris, "A Man before His Time," 70.

his church's mission board, he was equally uneasy with the kinds of large-scale, top-down approaches to development long favoured by many senior Western aid officials and leaders of indigenous governments. It is noteworthy that, within Canada, Faris' ideas about development had a more direct influence on CUSO, a secular NGO, than on the mission programme of his own church. I have failed to find evidence that either Faris personally or *To Plow with Hope* influenced the deliberations of the lay and clerical officials who orchestrated the major changes to the United Church's approach to mission that came about in the 1960s. When Faris died of Parkinson's Disease in 1974, the United Church *did* provide a warm acknowledgement of his career, describing him as a “[p]ioneer in the field of Technical Assistance” and a “forerunner of the new practical missionary.”⁹

By then, of course, the Church had come to share his faith in development and was demonstrating its enlarged understanding of mission by engaging in diverse forms of human rights activity with international and ecumenical partners. The last decades of Don Faris' life were marked by distance from the denomination and then increasing enfeeblement. But, to the extent that he was aware of the broadened global scope of the United Church's Division of World Outreach, he would undoubtedly have approved.

⁹ “Donald Kay Faris,” Faris biographical file, UCA.

Review Article

Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days

Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1995.

by Adam Kilner

Left Behind is a series portraying, in books, movies, and video games, an outline of the expected end-times associated with biblical eschatology. The first book (*Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days*, released 31 December 1995) follows Rayford Steele, his daughter Chloe, and Pastor Bruce Barnes in the aftermath of the Rapture (Christ's miraculous transportation of every believing Christian from earth into heaven). Another character is Cameron "Buck" Williams, a celebrated journalist, who follows the rapid rise of Nicolae Carpathia, the President of Romania.

Rayford Steele is a pilot for a large airline company. Married to Irene, he fancies Hattie Durham, a senior flight attendant, with whom he has been regularly working. During a flight, Rayford feels compelled to go into the airplane cabin to visit Hattie. She is found mid-panic because of missing passengers. She has searched the aircraft, and it becomes clear that the Rapture has just happened. People all over the plane were terrified. In one moment their loved ones were among them; in the next moment they were just gone . . . plucked away . . . by what? By whom? Nobody knew (18).

In the novel's account of geo-political affairs, the state of Israel has become an economic powerhouse through the brilliant invention of one of her citizens, Chaim Rosenzweig. Yet Israel has been attacked by "a great enemy from the north," "with the help of Persia, Libya, and Ethiopia." The themes of Ezekiel 38 and 39, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, and the Book of Revelation, in this thrilling adventure that spans 16 novels, 3 films, and 3 video games, will take readers through the restoration of Israel, the rebuffing of her enemies, the Rapture, the rise of the anti-Christ, and the tribulations of all those left behind on earth because they chose not to follow God.

Theology

The Left Behind Series is described by scholars as dispensationalist, pre-tribulation, and pre-millennial. These words, used mostly by scholars, describe the way in which God's relationship with humankind is changed from time to time. Dispensationalists maintain that 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 describes a rapture that will precede the "Great Tribulation," and more specifically, that all Christians, whether living or dead, will be transported physically into heaven before the beginning of the tribulation (*pre-tribulation*), and that Christ's literal and physical return to earth will happen prior to the millennium (*pre-millennialism*). The millennium is typically understood as a golden age or "a thousand-year period of blessedness."¹

Left Behind is both an exciting thriller and also a poor interpretation of the Bible. But, even as mainliners may interpret the mysteries of God differently than these folk, dispensationalists have some interesting responses to problems faced by those using current methods of biblical interpretation. First, Cyrus Ingerson Scofield, editor of the *Scofield Reference Bible*, popularized the extremely pertinent question that many continue to wrestle with today: "Why does the God of the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures) seem to be so different from the God of the New Testament (Greek Scriptures)?"

The response might be that God seems so different from Old Testament to New Testament because, even within the Old Testament, God responds to humankind in different ways over time. Dispensationalists refer to the list that Scofield put forward, categorizing the chronological periods of particular dispensations as follows:

1. Man innocent – the period of Adam and Eve until the Fall.
2. Man under conscience – the period of Adam and Eve after the Fall to the Great Flood.
3. Man in authority over the earth – the age from the post-flood covenant to the Tower of Babel.
4. Man under promise – the age of Abram to bondage in Egypt.

¹ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, second edition, ed. F.L. Cross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 916.

5. Man under law – the period from the wilderness wandering to the Cross of Jesus.
6. Man under grace – the period from the sacrificial death of Christ to the Second Coming of Christ.
7. Man under the personal reign of Christ – the period from the Second Coming of Christ to the coming of a “new heaven and a new earth” via the last battle between Jesus Christ and Satan.

In Scofield’s hands, dispensationalism is a biblical and prophetic interpretation viewing history and the future as a series of dramatically shifting arrangements and covenants between God and humankind. The advantage of a dispensational theology is that apparent inconsistencies in the Bible are reconciled as stages in a divinely ordained development, and the believer can continue to affirm that it is still the same God at work.

United Church Teaching on the End Times

It’s interesting that this thrilling adventure story offers a precise, cohesive, eschatological vision whereas the standards we use to interpret Scripture (the Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union, “the great creeds of the ancient Church,” and “the evangelical doctrines of the Reformation”) in The United Church of Canada are rather vague—or, perhaps, left open to mystery.

The Apostles’ Creed (Voices United 918) declares that Jesus “will come to judge the living and the dead.” A New Creed (VU 918) calls Jesus “our judge and our hope.” The Nicene Creed (VU 920) declares:

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end...

We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Article XIX of the Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union says:

Of the Resurrection, the Last Judgement, and the Future Life.
We believe that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of

the just and of the unjust, through the power of the Son of God, who shall come to judge the living and the dead; that the finally impenitent shall go away into eternal punishment and the righteous into life eternal.

Finally, Article XX says that “we confidently believe that by His [God’s] power and grace all His enemies shall finally be overcome, and the kingdoms of this world be made the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ.” It is striking how silent these affirmations are regarding the specifics of Christ’s ultimate triumph.

A “Rapture”?

The *Left Behind* series has faced sharp criticism over the years from a variety of sources. One major critique concerns the interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 as “the Rapture.” In his article, “Catholics: Raptured or Not?” Roman Catholic Michael D. Guinan recalls a teaching moment: “‘What is the Catholic teaching on the Rapture?’ It was over 30 years ago that a student in my Scripture class asked me that question. Drawing on all my years of Catholic education (kindergarten through the seminary and doctoral studies), I replied, ‘The *what?*’ I had never heard of it.”²

Thirty years later, Guinan realizes that many Christians have heard about the Rapture that supposedly separates the saints from the sinners, zaps the saints out of the current world and into the heavenly abode, and leaves behind the sinners to face “the tribulations.” The problem for Guinan, and, I suspect, many Christians from mainline denominations, is that within the theology of *Left Behind*, Christ appears to have two “second comings.” The first occurs during a pre-tribulation rapture. The second will take place sometime after the rapture of the faithful and the tribulation of the damned (those left behind to wage war against the Anti-Christ). Another criticism offered by Guinan is that the 1 Thessalonians passage is used to draw Christians out of the world, rather than to welcome God into our world. Guinan quotes Pope John Paul II: “We know that the apocalyptic images of the eschatological discourse about

²“Catholics: Raptured or Not?” *St. Anthony Messenger* 112/6 (November, 2004), 39-42. <http://www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/CU/ac1005.asp>

the end of all things should be interpreted in light of their intense symbolism.”

Craig S. Keener provides a simpler way of understanding some of the imagery in his commentary for pastors and curious lay persons. A reference to the coming of the Lord (4:15) is a reference that could equally apply to the visit of a royal dignitary, “which was celebrated with great pomp and majesty.”³ Keener makes mention of the fact that in the Hebrew Scriptures “trumpets (shofars, rams’ horns) were used especially to gather the assembly or give orders for battle.”⁴ The trumpet, therefore, appears to be not simply an instrument of annunciation and proclamation, but of assembly—to gather together the subjects of a ruler—in this case, the living and the dead who are ruled by God. Another image encountered is that of “clouds,” which could be a reference to the *Shekinah* (“presence of God”—Ex. 13:21; 14:19; 19:16; 24:15; 40:34-38; Mark 9:7; Acts 1:9). Throughout the Scriptures there seems to be a connection between clouds and God’s presence. It should not surprise us, then, that God’s people, both the living and the dead, are “caught up in the clouds together . . . to meet the Lord in the air . . .” (1 Thess. 4:17).

In mentioning both the living and the dead, Paul is pointing to a unity or “togetherness.” There are those who are dead who belong to Christ and those who are alive who belong to Christ. Paul is affirming that the faithful departed will not be excluded from reunion with Christ. The dead and the living will be together when Christ returns. In the cloud that surrounds this gathering, we’re meant to see the theological implication that God, in Christ, is meeting up with God’s people. This is togetherness!

In dispensationalism, however, the interpretation is that God, in Christ’s second coming, pulls Christians out of this world and into heaven, leaving everybody else to undergo intense suffering in battle with the Anti-Christ. Ancient tradition, found throughout the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, understands the provocative poetry of Paul to be about God’s covenant relationship with humankind and God’s creation, and includes finding the dead in Christ and the alive in Christ caught up

³ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 593.

⁴ *Ibid.*

together with the Divine Presence in the clouds.

In essence, many Protestant mainliners, Roman Catholics, and Orthodox Christians would find themselves at odds with dispensationalists over whether there is even such thing as “the Rapture.” Second, the 1 Thessalonians text does not separate sinners from saints, but rather makes distinctions based on the existential reality of human beings—they are either dead or alive—but both, according to Paul, “will be with the Lord forever” (1 Thess. 4:17). There is never any mention in the text of anybody going to heaven or anybody being *left behind* to face torment and tribulations and the minions of the devil. So, my analysis is that the interpretation of 1 Thessalonians found in *Left Behind* is not only wrong, but also dangerous, in that the concerns being dealt with in the series are very serious matters. They have seemingly made unfounded interpretations of the Epistle, thus not taking seriously a very provocative witness about the ultimate end toward which God, in Christ, nudges us and the world.

The Testimony of Jesus

A second major critique of the dispensationalist approach is that it seems to ignore Jesus’ own statements regarding the coming of the Son of Man in glory. Jesus speaks about the importance of watching for the coming of the Son of Man: “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Matt. 24:36). He makes similar remarks throughout the Gospel of Matthew (Matt. 24:36, 44, 50 and 25:13). The parallels are found in Mark 13:32 and Luke 12:39-40, 46. The coming of the Son of Man is a mystery of the Christian faith. It would seem that if we do not know the day or the hour, then we probably do not know any of the other specifics, including a schedule of events.

To put it mildly, *Left Behind* isn’t without its sceptics. Even the ultra-conservative Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, questions the theology of the series of books in their pamphlet, “Concerning the Coming of Our Lord Jesus and our being gathered to him: A Lutheran Response to the *Left Behind Series*”⁵

⁵<http://www.google.ca/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CE4QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.lcms.org%2FDocument.fdoc%3Fsrc%3Dlcm%26id%3D406&ei=hnnzT->

Again, Emergent theologian Brian McLaren makes a connection between the *Left Behind* and *The Da Vinci Code* in an interview with *Sojourners* magazine:

The book is fiction and it's filled with a lot of fiction about a lot of things that a lot of people have already debunked. But frankly, I don't think it has more harmful ideas in it than the *Left Behind* novels. And in a certain way, what the *Left Behind* novels do, the way they twist scripture toward a certain theological and political end, I think [Dan] Brown is twisting scripture, just to other political ends. But at the end of the day, the difference is I don't think Brown really cares that much about theology. He just wanted to write a page-turner and he was very successful at that.⁶

My own major criticisms are two: first, the Bible does not teach "the Rapture" and does not share specifics about the last things (like schedules); second, *Left Behind* seems to build its Rapture case on a misreading of the 1 Thessalonians text, which makes me consider the book to be dangerous for those who turn to the Bible for guidance.

That being said, however, I found the first four books in the series entertaining. I liked the fast pace of the series, the cheap thrills, and the wealth and variety of stories being told all at the same time. But beware: like Dan Brown's fiction, it's not true!

i3Joi1rQH29J3GAw&usg=AFQjCNGQUJQ7Sm_FXGFGrpxvyiYkkX6Aow&sig2=rZ5Eo8xvLoZn1QsUAcTy3w)

⁶ <http://sojo.net/sojomail/2006/05/09>

BOOK REVIEWS

Ordered Liberty: Readings in the History of United Church Worship

William Kervin. Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2011. Pp. 336.

First, full disclosure. The author of this book, Bill Kervin, has been a respected friend and colleague of mine for many years. I can't bring myself to call him Kervin, so throughout the review I will refer to him as Bill.

The Introduction says this publication is “intended as a reader or textbook for theological students, clergy, worship leaders, scholars, and interested lay persons.” I hope readers of this review—especially clerical ones—will not too quickly say to themselves, “I'm sure this book is for somebody else.” The title comes from the Preface to the 1932 *Book of Common Order*: “In the Churches which united to form The United Church of Canada there was an ordered liberty in common worship.”

The book is divided into two sections. In the first there are 21 chapters, and in most cases they are very brief. In the first section Bill identifies portions of official publications of our denomination since its inception. They relate not only to our church's public worship but also to our corporate profession of faith. To each of these Bill provides a very helpful explanatory introduction. That section of the book in itself justifies the publication. But the second section contains 14 interesting chapters by United Church commentators. Except for the first one, Bill has placed the essays in chronological order, and the authors come from all the decades since 1925, with the last essay prepared in 2011 specifically for this book. The final chapter is Bill's own gathering up of the threads.

When we consider some of the essayists' names—the list includes Alexander MacMillan, Richard Davidson (Senior), R.B.Y. Scott, Barbara Bagnell, Fred McNally, John Webster Grant, David Newman, and Charlotte Caron—we know we will be enriched by reading the second section of this book. And we are doubly enriched, because once again Bill has written a brief and helpful introduction to each essay. It's clear that I am commending the book for all those who ponder matters related to our public worship.

In his essay, Robert Wallace raises an interesting issue as to whether Christian worship is a “given” or is simply a “construct.” He doesn’t develop the issue, unfortunately, but it doesn’t take much reflection to determine what he means by a “construct.” Guessing what he might have meant about a “given,” however, is another matter. Richard Davidson, R.B.Y. Scott, Fred McNally and David Newman all take for granted some givens, and indicate what they are. Many of the others, regrettably, give us no hints. The constant urgings for creativity in worship often come without giving readers any sense that we belong to a community that has been worshiping for 2000 years, that we may have some accountability to the practices of our ancestors, or that they have any resources to offer us.

Brevity restricts me to only one illustration, so with apologies to Bonnie Greene I will use her essay, written specifically for this book, as an instance. Bonnie states that the “digital technologies of the 21st century” move us into a “visual culture” that requires us to change our worship from a focus on words to a visual literacy, which “is the ability to interpret and make meaning from information presented in the form of an image.” (Fred McNally, writing his essay exactly 30 years earlier, without any awareness of digital technologies, strongly urges us to recognize the need for the visual.) Bonnie makes her point vividly by describing a United Church service containing, as usual, a pile of prayers printed in the bulletin. The service was unexpectedly attended by some bikers come to witness the baptism of a friend’s baby. The minister was faced with a stern question afterwards: “Did you know they couldn’t read?”

I am puzzled, in the face of this wonderful illustration, that Bonnie gives no acknowledgment that, for most of Christian history, most people in the church’s congregations were illiterate. Moreover, the liturgy was often in a language they didn’t understand. The visual part was vital. With the statues, icons, and often with stained glass windows, and centrally with the drama of the liturgy, worship was largely a visual experience, even an olfactory one, since there would be the use of incense.

To be fair, Bonnie also needed to be brief. But having specifically directed our attention to the Protestant Reformers, whom she says centered things on *ideas*, it’s natural for the reader to ask what the Reformers were replacing. And for me her comment on the Reformers themselves doesn’t catch the tenor of the time. A quick dip into the

abstractions of the scholastic theologians after a bit of reading of the warm-blooded work of Luther reveals that the situation had its paradoxes.

The Reformers were concerned about the ear's relationship to faith. They believed that the contemporary practice of giving precedence to the eye over the ear was contrary to the outlook of the Bible. Luther maintained that the Gospel was not meant for reading so much as it was for speaking out loud, even screaming! Faith comes from *hearing*. Hence, a fresh emphasis upon preaching. More than we ever recognize, however, in our United Church worship culture we are inheritors of the British Puritans of the 17th century, who reacted so violently against "idols" in church buildings, and against prescribed "ritual." They saw themselves as Calvin's children (but I doubt if he would have acknowledged them.) In any case, since so many people in the 16th century were still illiterate, the long-standing custom of depending upon memory was found as much among the Protestants as it was among their predecessors. Components of the service, catechisms, Scripture, etc., were memorized.

In our churches today, virtually nothing is committed to memory except the Lord's Prayer. The words in the Sunday service change every week, which leads to the question: To whom do our Sunday services belong? In an earlier draft of this review, which I thought would be the final one, I answered that question by offering a few of my own opinions. Before I sent it in to the editor, however, an email arrived from a ministerial friend of mine, Colin Peterson, who recently became a Catholic. Colin shared an e-mail link with me and a number of other people, and he was responding to a member of our link, Adam Kilner, who had described positively a Catholic youth gathering he attended where their worship included no "paper." Colin picked up on that and in the course of his e-mail inadvertently dealt with my question above and even with Bonnie's story about the bikers:

What I've come to love about the Catholic Mass is the lack of a bulletin. I've attended Mass in Vancouver, Costa Rica, Mexico, New Orleans, and no matter where I go, I can enter fully into the drama and mystery of the Eucharist because the key musical events

. . . are mostly recognizable in any language and committed to memory by most Catholics . . . It deepens the sense that it is

indeed the “work of the people,” something “owned” by the whole community and not something laid on by the worship leader.

Well, it’s clear that I would like the conversation about public worship in the United Church to continue. And Bill, in pulling together the sources that he has, and the essays that we might otherwise never have seen, has provided us with just the right material to ensure that our conversation might be fruitful. Many thanks to him.

Mac Watts, Winnipeg

Practicing Reverence: an ethic for sustainable earth communities.

Ross L. Smillie. Kelowna: CopperHouse, Wood Lake Publishing, 2011. Pp. 206.

On matters of great moral importance, to remain neutral is to fail the test . . . What is the great moral issue of *our* time? For what will we be judged by future generations? Where do our choices most matter? From among several worthy candidates, I believe our outstanding moral imperative is to maintain the health of the natural systems in which human life is embedded (Introduction).

Skillfully authored by United Church pastor and ethicist Ross Smillie, *Practicing Reverence* takes on the task of guiding the reader deep into the labyrinth of moral decision-making. Smillie asks, “How have we so fundamentally misunderstood the human place in relation to the rest of the earth that we undermine the capacity of the earth to sustain us at all? Distorted conceptions of what it means to live a good life have led us astray, and we now have to rethink what we understand the good life to be about and how to live it” (20).

The book begins with the requisite analysis of what is wrong with the world, in a chapter entitled “Fragile Systems.” As the title indicates, Smillie’s understanding of ecology is based on systems theory, and the complex relationships between natural and human systems. Moving

away from a view of “environment” which locates the problem “out there,” systems-based ecology sees humans as deeply embedded members of a much wider web of relations, a diverse biotic community. By exploring this ecological paradigm, and pointing out the various interrelated factors which threaten our planetary ecosystems, Smillie sets the stage for a far-ranging conversation about the ethical challenges facing us.

Using the Atlantic seal hunt as a case study, Smillie outlines several different types of moral or ethical arguments which are used by both opponents and advocates of the hunt. This allows him to survey natural law theory, utilitarianism, and deontological, rights-based arguments. While he describes the strengths and weaknesses of each theory, he regards the individualistic nature of each of these theories as a liability to ecological ethics. “Individuals cannot be isolated from the ecosystems of which they are a part,” writes Smillie. “There is a balance to be struck between regard for the individual and regard for wider wholes. Any moral system that would accept skinning animals alive (for example) would be a questionable ethic. But a moral system that respects only individuals and pays no attention to families, communities, species, or ecosystems is not adequate either” (58–59).

This critique leads to the core of Smillie’s constructive proposal: a form of character or virtue ethics adapted to the formation of good ecological “citizens of the Earth” (67). An ecological character ethic draws on the virtues of friendship, narratives, social practices, and traditions to help create individuals-in-community who are equipped to live the good life, a life which values wisdom in relating to the whole creation. He proposes Albert Schweitzer’s “Reverence for Life” and Aldo Leopold’s “Land Ethic” as good examples of the type of ecological character ethic needed in our day. After laying this foundation, Smillie devotes the remainder of his book to exploring economic policy, scientific research, and religious practice through this lens of ecological virtue and character ethics.

There is much to be valued in this text. Smillie provides an ethical toolkit which is sorely lacking in much contemporary discourse (and conflict) on environmental issues. His analysis is clear and scholarly, without being pedantic. The chapters on religious practices are especially

helpful, layering a perspective which is courageous, hopeful, and bold, without being naïve about the depth of the challenges facing the Earth community.

Of course, there are also several shortcomings to this volume as well. I know it is an aesthetic issue, but I found the cover of the book quite off-putting. The view through the front window of a speeding car is in such opposition to the title of the book that it jars me every time I look at it! On a more substantive level, there are some important voices that are not heard (at least directly) in Smillie's work; eco-feminist, indigenous, and post-colonial perspectives and concerns are largely absent, even though the book as a whole is consonant with such perspectives.

In short, *Practicing Reverence* is definitely worth the read. For theological students and dedicated laypeople alike, Smillie's work goes a long way toward rendering complex ethical issues clear and accessible. By commending helpful and engaging narratives, traditions, and practices, Smillie assists all of us to become wise, and good, ecological citizens of the Earth.

Shawn Sanford-Beck, Saskatoon.

Living Hope: the Future and Christian Faith

David H. Jensen. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010. Pp. 136.

David H. Jensen is Professor of Constructive Theology at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. A member of the Workgroup on Constructive Theology, Dr. Jensen brings to his book, *Living Hope*, that collective's enthusiasm for mediating between the classical tradition and the contemporary situation. The conversation concerns eschatology, a topic with which some Christians are more comfortable than others, and a theme that, for Jensen, embraces sacraments and informs ethics. The author intends to help mainstream Christians appreciate hope for God's future as very much integrated with living intentionally as God's people in the present. Along the way, Jensen drops in on an imagined group of young adults drinking coffee and expressing their views about Christian

faith. These seekers represent one audience that the author intends to engage, along with clergy, educators and others who would join this dialogue and be deepened in their faith.

In Part I Jensen surveys biblical voices of hope, underlining the variety of approaches. The impression of freshness that struck me about the whole work is evidenced by his inclusion of the realistic hope proclaimed in the Wisdom Literature of the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament Letter of James. Our author doesn't deny that apocalyptic hope speaks loudly especially in Daniel and Revelation, but holds it in tension with this-worldly hope in the Gospels' witness to Jesus. He concludes that Scripture's richness is found in the diversity of voices witnessing to their faith.

Part II of *Living Hope* addresses four images of Christian hope: the Kingdom of God, the Resurrection of the Body, the Second Coming and the New Creation. Informed by Scripture, John Calvin's *Institutes* and historic Reformed confessions of faith, Jensen highlights the initiative and graciousness of God. By God's grace the Kingdom—in Jesus present and still to come—is celebrated and anticipated in the Church's loving witness. The hope for resurrection, God's destiny of new relationship for all creation, empowers Christians for courageous life in this world. Here Jensen contrasts the orthodox affirmation of God's resurrection of the body with those persistent notions of the soul's immortality, and his brief section on individuality reminds me of the personalism expressed by Dr. Martin Luther King. In considering the doctrine of the Second Coming Jensen emphasizes, with Karl Barth, Christ's coming continually into the present moment, announcing a strange justice that is more transformative than retributive. The New Creation is a greater promise for which to hope than mere personal salvation, and I appreciated the reflection on Revelation's image of the city. The work of human culture might be redeemed rather than destroyed.

It is particularly in Part III, Contested Questions, that Dr. Jensen critiques the affirmations made by dispensationalists, the literalizing of biblical images into a roadmap making humans too certain and God less free. The author turns the tables on the Lahaye/Jenkins *Left Behind* series, noting the Christian triumphalism in their approach to Israel and contrasting it with Judaism's heritage of seriously wrestling with sacred

texts. The United Church has been influenced by Methodism's Arminian emphasis on sanctification to which Jensen responds in a clearly Reformed tone in his section on Heaven and Hell. In Revelation, heaven comes to earth rather than the righteous rising to heaven. If this writer minimizes the biblical witness to Armageddon, Antichrist and the millennium, it is not to ridicule people who emphasize such terms, but to give greater emphasis to God's vulnerable approach to creation in Jesus.

Finally, in Part IV, Jensen emphasizes the place of Baptism and the Lord's Supper in sustaining our lives of hope. He is not the first writer to use the film, *Babette's Feast*, in order to amplify the many ways people are nourished and transformed as God's reign surprises us in the shared feast. Aware of the danger that the theocentric Reformed approach might encourage passivity, Jensen reminds us that it is not a zero sum game. Jesus showed us the way, bearing witness in present action to God's future. Rather than being resigned, Christians are called to live in hope, conscious of the personal, social and cosmic dimensions of living hope.

Affirming in respectful and inspiring ways his own faith understanding, Jensen addresses a wide audience. Clergy and lay, well read and new to theological conversation, many will find this material provoking. Discussion questions at the end of each chapter lend themselves to group study. We don't learn of any final enlightenment concerning Christian doctrine amongst those coffee drinking seekers to whom we were introduced. Perhaps Jensen's hope is that we might build on his work in our own contexts and continue the conversation.

David Crombie, Cold Lake, Alberta

Here on Earth: A Natural History of the Planet

Tim Flannery. Toronto, ON: HarperCollins, 2010. Pp. 316.

In *Here on Earth*, Australian palaeontologist Tim Flannery argues that the way we understand our role on Earth may well determine our fate. Will we choose a path of "tooth and claw" competition and exploitation leading to ecosystem collapse? Or will we instead choose to live cooperatively, in harmony with Earth's ecosystems? Flannery does much

to illuminate this question; yet he also misses opportunities to nurture hope for a sustainable future.

Flannery begins by describing the two men who independently formulated the theory of evolution: Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913). Both affirmed the role of natural selection, but Wallace understood this process to include both competitive *and* cooperative dynamics. Yet, it is Darwin that we remember—perhaps because his theories can be used to justify an exploitative economic system driven by unbridled competition and survival of the fittest.

Wallace saw evolution in more holistic terms, focusing in his final years on the role our planet's unique atmosphere plays in sustaining life. In so doing, he anticipated James Lovelock's *Gaia* hypothesis that Earth functions as an integrated system—similar to a single organism—to maintain the conditions suitable for life. While the *Gaia* hypothesis focuses on dynamics of interdependence leading to greater ecosystem stability, Peter Ward's *Medea* hypothesis posits that species, if left unchecked by competition will exploit resources to the point of ecosystem collapse. While both theories hold some truth, Flannery believes that our future depends on whether we choose to understand the role of humanity in *Gaian* or *Medean* terms.

Flannery spins a compelling story illustrating the dynamics that have enabled Earth to sustain and diversify the web of life. He then describes how the *Medean* tendency has played out in human history. As *homo sapiens* migrated from Africa to Asia, Australia, Europe, and the Americas, he believes that humans systematically hunted large mammals to extinction, often destroying the keystone species essential to healthy ecosystems. Only after eliminating the largest animals did humans sometimes learn to live in harmony with nature, often inventing ingenious management strategies like controlled burnings to replace the services once provided by large mammals. In so doing, humans were able to adopt a more *Gaian* ethic of cooperative interdependence with local ecosystems.

Flannery's narrative is captivating, but he seems to ignore any evidence that may weaken his argument. His theory that humans inevitably drove large mammals to extinction (except in Africa, where people and megafauna evolved together) fails in the case of the Americas.

While mastodons, mammoths, and other large mammals did disappear around the time that the Clovis people arrived 13,000 years ago, there is now significant evidence that humans inhabited the Americas millennia before that migration. The presence of people living for thousands of years in balance with large mammals supports the idea that humans are not condemned to follow a destructive *Medean* paradigm.

Flannery's understanding of ancient cultures also seems limited. Characterizing Stone Age family structure as one "at whose centre sat a dominant male, one or several mature females and their offspring" (133), he ignores the matrifocal cultures of Old Europe or the Americas. Similarly, he cites anecdotal evidence to suggest that ancient cultures were systemically plagued by violence, but neglects to describe civilizations such as that of the ancient Caral in Peru where there is no evidence of walls, weapons, or violent deaths. Nor does Flannery explore how many cultures developed sustainable agricultural systems, demonstrating a high degree of ecological wisdom; instead, he states categorically that agricultural societies are "composed almost entirely of incompetent individuals" (123).

Here on Earth seems to me the work of a great writer arguing a vital thesis (the need to move towards a *Gaian* ethic) based on somewhat shaky evidence and theories. Flannery often shares jewels of information, such as the way that sea organisms effectively buried dangerous metals in the bowels of the Earth. Yet he misses key opportunities to support the idea that "biophilia"—an innate love of nature—is as ingrained in humans as any tendency to exploit, compete, or conquer.

Overall, while Flannery wants humans to adopt a more cooperative, *Gaian* nature, he often seems to support a kinder, gentler version of evolution, driven only by competition and survival of the fittest. In a 2010 interview, he said: "Competition is evolution's forge, that's what creates us, but the legacy of that competition is always cooperation." Perhaps if Flannery were able to incorporate insights from feminism, deep ecology, and systems theory, he could come to see that both cooperation *and* competition drive evolution—and indeed that the former may be even more fundamental.

Mark Hathaway, University of Toronto

Three Ways of Grace: Drawing Closer to the Trinity.

Edited by Rob Fennell and Ross Lockhart. (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2010) Pp. 184.

In *Three Ways of Grace*, professor Rob Fennell and pastor Ross Lockhart bring together a variety of voices to help us ponder how contemporary Christians relate to the Trinity. While this book would be an interesting read for any Christian, it is peppered with words from “A Song of Faith,” “A New Creed” and even the “Basis of Union,” as it is rooted in the context of The United Church of Canada. The variety of perspectives is most impressive, as we hear from a newly ordained minister and a former moderator, those born in Canada and those who are newcomers, and ordained ministers from coast to coast to coast. Each represents not only a unique perspective but also a unique style of writing as well, giving us pages filled with poetry, letters, stories, prayers, and essays.

In the spirit of the Three-in-One, the book is divided into three sections with each devoted to exploring a way of grace: the grace to be alone with God, the grace to share in community, and the grace to live in the world God loves. While each chapter certainly stands alone, the book builds as it moves from personal relationship to a broader understanding of God. Reflection questions guide readers into conversation to connect the Trinity to their lives.

This book ambitiously attempts to reclaim the Trinity for our people in our time; to pull the doctrine out of the recesses of seminary libraries where it has been hidden, dust it off, and immerse ourselves in it. “As we cautiously welcome the doctrine of the Trinity back from exile, there is a real opportunity these days to pump some more theological life into the anemic veins of our understanding of the life of God” (23). The book works to meet this goal by making the Trinity accessible. “When the Trinity is seen as a puzzle, it can become esoteric, the preserve of the elite few who can claim to understand it” (18). *Three Ways of Grace* does not try to offer a full, technical and singular explanation of an historic doctrine. Rather, it aims to explore the Trinity as a living, breathing Presence that claims us and that we can understand using our own images

and language.

I appreciate how the book is firmly grounded in faith, Scripture, and the historic Christian experience; moreover, it helps us to find ways to begin to expand our limited understanding of God. The images offered by the contributors are relevant and vibrant. In one instance, we are asked to imagine God as a grandmother summoning her family to the dinner table (117). Another time our interaction with God is compared to participating in a game of archery (90). The metaphor of a rock band is used in exploring the persons of the Trinity (51), and the imagery of dancing is used to describe God in action (9, 12, 17, 67, 94). As the lens of Trinity is used to examine the world, diverse themes like justice, evangelism, creation, peace, human suffering, Christian hope, community, hospitality, technology, and calling emerge. Diverse ways of engaging the Divine are celebrated throughout. For instance, in the chapter “The Beauty of Silence” by Won Hur, the wisdom of St. Francis of Assisi, the proclamations of “A New Creed” and the words of jazz musician Keith Jarrett are called upon in a single paragraph.

Having read a number of books and articles, and taken academic courses on trinitarian theology, I find this a creative, refreshing, and novel approach. I believe its success lies in its invitation into the life of the Trinity. “It invites those who hunger for God to feast on a richness of images, connections, and love” (2). As each contributor was invited to hold God up to their own light and share what was revealed, readers are invited to re-imagine the Trinity for ourselves. It is a valuable tool that helps us move from rationalizing to immersing ourselves in the mystery. *Three Ways of Grace* abandons explanation in favour of exploration.

At the foundation of this book is a strong belief that the Trinity is necessary for Christians to express their faith and identity. “This may sound like an exercise in abstract theological speculation, but it is not only the church's rumination on who God is. It is also our faithful reflection about who we are, and why others matter, and how we belong to this earth” (111). *Three Ways of Grace* takes a complex and sometimes dry theological concept and challenges us to bring it to life.

Ali Smith, Fredericton.

The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock

Fred Craddock (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) Pp. 305.

The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock appears in a series of collected sermons by various noted American preachers. Fred Craddock is Bandy Distinguished Professor of Preaching and New Testament Emeritus at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University, in Atlanta, Georgia, and Minister Emeritus of Cherry Log Christian Church in Cherry Log, Georgia. Born in 1928 in rural Humboldt, Tennessee, Craddock survived serious illness as a child, grew up in poverty, and developed a perspective on life that was influenced by his diminutive height. These factors, along with his immersion in the great story telling traditions of the southern United States, and his many years studying and teaching Scripture and homiletics, have combined to imbue Craddock's preaching with particular poignancy, potency, humour and wisdom.

In her Foreword, Barbara Brown Taylor observes astutely that “to preach like Fred Craddock you have to *be* Fred Craddock . . . If you want to preach as he does, then be who *you* are—inhabiting your own body, using your own voice, finding your own language, noticing your own life” (viii). She continues: “Here are some things I notice about how Fred does what he does. He trusts emotion and intuition to light the way into a text as much as he trusts education and intelligence . . . He speaks to his listeners the same way the text speaks to him, which almost never involves the shortest distance between point A and point B. He uses lovely and concrete language to evoke visceral response . . . Fred chooses his words with such care that they arrive like specially selected gifts—never too pricey, never too precious—just exactly the right words to describe what he wants to convey. He tells the truth about things . . .”(x).

In his Introduction, Craddock himself writes: “The first thing I want to say is that these sermons were prepared to be heard not read. They were from the time of conception aimed for the ear not the eye . . . Your task would be far easier if you were reading writing but, in fact, you are reading speaking. Of these fifty-five messages, only one existed as a manuscript to be read before it was delivered from a pulpit . . . My

preaching has been attempts to implement the definition of a sermon as an event in the world of sound” (xiii).

Craddock’s many published works over more than forty years have been seminal in the development and spread of an inductive, narrative, parabolic, conversational method of preaching that has been taught in seminaries and practised in pulpits throughout North America. For a fuller description of Craddock’s method and his approach to preaching, readers would do well to turn to his earlier study, *Overhearing the Gospel* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2002).

Reading this WJK Press collection of sermons of Craddock is a delight and a joy. Experiencing and pondering them, one at a time, yields much fruit and inspiration for one’s own preaching. Reading them together, one after another, is to experience the manifold pleasure of feasting on wonderful stories and scriptural insights that engage the listener/reader and convey a palpable experience of the gospel’s good news.

The rhythms and cadence of Fred Craddock’s voice, the connections he makes and distinctive turns of phrase he uses are all unique to him. Immersing oneself in this collection of sermons ought not to lead preachers to attempt a pale imitation of Craddock’s sermons and style within their own sermons. Soaking up this much of his preaching, however, ought to inspire many preachers and others to find their own authentic style, draw upon their own insights, make their own connections and tell their own stories to illumine and proclaim the gospel’s good news—through the vehicle of their own bodies, voices and personalities—in conversation with Scripture and with their particular congregations.

Earlier volumes in this WJK series have collected sermons of Walter Brueggeman, William Willimon and William Sloane Coffin, each of them worthy of inclusion. However, the representative nature of these preachers is rather homogenous. It is to be hoped that future volumes will include sermons by other wonderful and inspiring preachers drawn from a greater diversity of race, gender, nationality, social location, cultural context, ecclesial tradition and theological perspective.

Ron McConnell, Saskatoon.