



MODELS AND METAPHORS: CHRISTIAN HOPE AND THE DEATH OF NATURE

NICOLA HOGGARD CREEGAN

Christianity and the practice of paying attention to nature are sometimes uneasy bedfellows. Theology can take a large part of the blame. So much of what we believe and practice encourages dependence on God at the expense of action. God is sovereign, for instance. God is the preserver of life and the cosmos. What part is there for us to play in God's overwhelming work? What if we do save a few trees? How does that compare with the transcendent actions of God?

Then there is salvation. God is the author of our salvation. Do we dare to participate in that great work? We may have extended our understanding of salvation to the whole world, to the universe even. We believe in the transformation of all things, and that all that is good will endure beyond death. But this endurance does not help to induce the sense of urgency we must find to deal with problems the earth is facing here and now. Another significant factor in the neglect that we Christians sometimes display is also our reliance on Word as a source

of understanding about God. Nature then plays second fiddle, always less important than Word in our motivations and embrace. Nature is indeed sometimes suspect, thought to be less than the Word, or tainted by its association with paganism.

Jesus, however, did not go around the Judean countryside promising only a paradise in the future for all who accept their fate; on the contrary Jesus wept at death and healed disease and cast out demons. Jesus came among us as flesh and blood, taking on cells with the fragile signature of the human genome. This alone is a reason why we, as followers of Christ, should also affirm all life and make healing our calling. Moreover, we did not get into our present predicament with climate change by just trusting in God. It is our active involvement in the world and changing of the world that has brought us to this point. We cannot legitimately argue that all the activity that has brought about climate change is warranted, but we expect God to fix it all up. Even those of us who believe that matter

will be transformed and not superseded, can fall prey to these errors. It is so easy to slip into thinking that if God is transforming everything what does it matter how much of the work we have done or have not done first? This kind of fatalist faith is an ever present temptation.

Just as Jesus came amongst us, embodied and alive in a particular place and time, Christians are called to enter into the natural world in which we are placed, not just for the good of the earth but for our own good as well. For it is in nature that we will sense the presence of God's Spirit and the imprint of the incarnation. If we love the world of nature and respect its hidden forms and life then we will also desire its health and flourishing.

At the same time – and Christian faith always involves this phrase, “at the same time” – faith does say something to the edge over which all of us see too clearly. Climate change is bringing the frail ecological balance of life on earth into jeopardy. An asteroid could and probably will hit the earth while *homo sapiens* rules; in the very end the earth will be consumed by the flames of the dying sun; the universe itself is possibly heading for a cold death. As remote as these edges are to our present consciousness they are there. Like the heroine in the movie *Melancholia* we are staring at the end, however far away. These endings, our own and that of nature as we know it, are an uneasy boundary in our consciousness.

At this point faith does point beyond what we see – to hope. Christians can enter this bleak story with a counter-factual vision, a vision of God present in the glory of creation, and promising an unimaginable

enduring of all life beyond death and into a new embodiment: a universe that is not subject to decay, lives that are not destroyed by asteroids or cancer or grief.

In fact this glory, this future is thought to be with us even now if only we know how to look. A part of the Christian presence in environmental concern is this pointing to the eternal life and glory that is with us already, the love that is evident in all that lives, however fragile and contingent it appears.

Whether it means digging in the earth, analysing bones, listening for birds or culling rats, environmental action is also a work that affirms the promise and direction and *telos* of nature. Sometimes science has presented a natural world that is dead and random and very far from God's

embrace. This picture too, has kept us captive, to use a Wittgensteinian phrase. If God is the creator then God's presence and love have imbued the whole evolutionary process. The progress of nature is nature's coming to consciousness and to a consciousness of God. Participation in God and in God's love is therefore

another reason to be a part of the great work of nature's care and restoration.

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