

Observations at the COP-21 UN Summit on Climate

Global Climate Change and Spiritual Principles

Sunday evening, December 6th, 2015
by Fred Krueger

Panel Participants:

Dr. George Marshall, linguist, UK; Rev. Fletcher Harper, Episcopalian, US; Valerian Bernard, Hindu, India; Martin Kopp, Lutheran, ACT Alliance, Switzerland; plus many others who spoke, but were not named

Every religious organization which has studied the climate issue has declared it an urgent issue which must be more fully and widely addressed. The future of a stable world is at stake. Leaders may see the problem clearly, but it is so large that it is often hard to communicate the immensity of the dilemma we face. It is widely declared from all faith traditions that global climate change is a moral and spiritual issue.

Despite this unanimity of perception among religious leaders, Linguist Dr. George Marshall observed that religious groups have not well communicated the problem. Once we understand the extent of climate change, it is scary. This has caused many to describe the problem in fearful terms. But a terminology of fear does not teach well. Terms that imply danger, future destruction, huge storms, polar melting, drought and heat death in the tropics, etc. may be entirely appropriate, but they are not terms which transform. Dr. Marshall's linguistic studies show that people respond far more readily when language is used that is appealing to noble

values and by use of positive language – love of God, beauty of the earth, responsibility for future generations, etc.

Additionally, too many facts produce "analysis paralysis." To communicate the problem of climate change, keep the message simple. Must not only have a right description of the problem, but must communicate a clear vision of direction. Without clear direction, the description becomes hopeless. Discussions of climate change must provide specific examples of what people can do. The problem is so large as it often brings fear and avoidance.

A blend of messages is important. Communication of the problem is difficult if one only has the words of faith, but not the actions. Clergy often communicate who they are more than what they represent. In the nature of communication, we transmit our whole lives and state of consciousness more than the content of our words. Transformation does not happen merely with words about transformation. Consciousness overlays and permeates the words. To teach transformation, one must be transformed. Our actions continually speak louder than our words.

Martin Kopp, from Lutheran World Services in Geneva, Switzerland, reported that climate justice is an effective term because it applies the principle of equity across society and shows how imbalanced is our present social structure. Both Christians and Jews respond to the concept. It is also deeply embedded in Scripture and theology.

Christians and Jews both respond to terms of love, beauty, hope, care and responsibility for the earth. These are deeply rooted in Scripture and they help us make connections to both our faith and the need to protect the earth. Today, despite the goodness of the earth, humans are endangered because of their own behavior, because of their own unindicted and unrecognized sin, and because clergy have not communicated the moral and ethical issues involved.

Pope Francis brought this into focus by his encyclical to the whole world. He declared a need for "ecological conversion," meaning an engagement with those biblical principles not often sufficiently emphasized at the very beginning of Genesis.

Dominion, meaning acting in the place of Christ and with the mind and attitudes of Christ, implies an ascetic approach to the world. This includes recognition that the Earth is the Lord's, and therefore not ours to abuse or degrade. Dominion means that we follow the commands to take good care of the earth. Pollution or any form of degrading is not allowed.

Stewardship means that we act on behalf of the Lord. We have been given a charge to "dress and keep the earth." The early Church saw this as a mandate to raise the earth up to into its full cosmological potential, that is, to transform and transfigure it. Jesus on the Mount of transfiguration gives us an example of making all radiantly bright. A steward acts on behalf of the Lord and cares for what belongs to the Lord.

The Covenant that God makes with Noah (Genesis 9) says that as long as Noah and his descendants obey the laws of God, there will not be another great flood or calamity. As we work to obey God, there blessing upon our actions. As we serve ourselves without regard for our neighbors or God, then we bring defilement upon the earth and all that is in it.

Patriarch Bartholomew has bluntly declared abuse of the earth is a sin, and that climate change is a form of genocide, a mass form of suicide.

Valerie Bernard reflected on Eastern religions and said that we can learn from nature as it represents a certain wisdom embedded in the life and design of the earth. People everywhere respond to the language of the heart, about the plight of humanity.

When American president Barack Obama spoke to the COP21 opening plenary, he delivered an unusual speech for a political leader. He used words filled with spiritual values. He surprised delegates because he did not sound like a politician. He sounded like a new Martin Luther King. And this was very effective.

Reverend Fletcher Harper added that an engagement with climate change is crucial for young people. If religious groups want to reach young people, they must tackle difficult current issues. They must talk about climate change, regardless of the type of religious teaching involved. Too many older clergy shy away from discussing climate change. Why is this?

As a principle people of faith must be concerned about the future. Christian eschatology looks forward to a new earth and a new heaven. We begin to build that now by the degree of our faithfulness. We are called to be transformed. A new person in Christ still contains the form of the old untransformed person. Similarly the new earth will be built upon the form of the present world.

There is vision here. Christians believe that we live in Christ and the Holy Spirit. We believe that God is everywhere. This means we live in an ocean of God, rather like fish in the sea who have a difficult time comprehending the nature of water. Disciples of Christ are different from fish in that we are rationale; we have been told that we live in God and are accountable for our actions. This means we should do all in our power to avoid hurting or harming what first belongs to God.

Climate change is an issue of energy and lifestyle. We have organized modern society around energy. To be effective at communicating the moral values implied in climate change, clergy especially, but all people, must examine their values and their lifestyle. What does one's lifestyle represent? If everyone in the world lived by one's standard of lifestyle, would the world solve the climate problem? If one's way of living could be multiplied and became the model for the world's seven billion plus people, would the earth survive? What would need to change?

For clergy it is important to live out the implications of Christian faith. Clergy replicate themselves in those in the congregation. It is well known that in teaching, personality and attitudes are transmitted just as much as the words of faith.

To become effective at teaching climate change, we must raise up models of the future. What are those models? We can name some of those qualities now. A beginning list includes becoming carbon free (meaning no fossil fuels), embracing organic foods (meaning toxic and chemical free), and having compassion and respect for life (meaning respect for all life). This list should include holding a vision of God's goodness indwelling all things, recognizing God as the source for all life (and therefore a unity to life). Justice, charity, service and humility should be included in the list of qualities that help to address climate change.

People need to pray to see themselves in terms of how they are part of the healing of the earth – or perhaps a continuation of its despoliation. They need to pray so that the whole world can make the changes that are clearly necessary. As an industrialized society, we tend to take too much and pollute too much and do too little to maintain the integrity of the earth and its life support systems.

It has been suggested that to some extent we have lost the feminine side of God. Protestants are particularly in need here. Many Christians don't see how Mother Mary, as Queen of Heaven, relates to wisdom or to Mother Earth. The connections are not well articulated in theology. The feminine dimension in Christianity helps bring manifestation to prayers.

To address climate change, we need to discern the cry of the earth. Pope Francis says that we begin to discern that cry by listening to the cry of the poor. That cry reflects the failure of justice in society which is reflected in how we degrade the earth ; in how we fail to speak out against pollution and pesticides, poverty and the many pains in the earth and the mistreatment of its animals. We are facing a new situation on the earth - and technology will not address it. Pollution is not just a problem of technology misapplied as it emerges from the human heart. This is why religious leaders say that climate change issues are moral and spiritual problems. Failure to address these issues goes back to a failure to fulfill the fundamentals of religion.

An example of positive change is the Canadian delegation to COP21. With a new prime minister it placed many people of faith on its delegation. They brought a recent (September 2015) statement on climate justice to the entire COP. Their declaration calls for their own federal government in Ottawa to action to end poverty and fight climate change. In their declaration, they say:

As faith community leaders, we understand the climate crisis demands more than technical fixes – a spiritual and moral, even ecological transformation is needed. We commit to play our part to honestly and directly name our current crisis, to raise awareness of its urgency, to encourage transformative

actions that change our consumption based economy of growth into a stewardship economy of care, and to develop our own community operations and use of buildings in ways that respect sustainability standards and the ecological integrity of human and natural life.

This statement has received unanimous support from a variety of Canadian religious groups including unanimous support from the Canadian Council of Churches, which represents 85 per cent of all Canadian Christians. Many others will be supporting this declaration.

This is only a beginning exploration of the religious principles and spiritual precepts that can help all of us address global climate change. Each listener should add to this introduction according to his or her own tradition and theology.

Note

This was a multi-denominational panel on Climate Change and Spirituality sponsored by French civil society. It sought to represent concepts from many denominations and religious traditions.