Temporality and Christian Environmental Activism

Climate Change is a wicked problem for a variety of reasons. It involves consequences and impacts that will be felt not by the agents of present destruction but by future generations. As we struggle against what Stephen Gardiner calls "the tyranny of the contemporary" climate change seems increasingly to be an "ethical tragedy" which requires new modes of thinking.[1] Exascerbating the problem further, activists and campaigners have taken up a symmetrical narrative (which can be found across business and government), posing apocalyptic scenarios (as with the Transition Towns highlighting of "peak oil") which socio-psychological studies suggest can be actually demotivating to the people they are intended to reach. As social psychologist, Robert Gifford suggests, in facing climate change, people "sometimes do not act because they perceive that they have little behavioral control over the outcome."[2] In this way, apocalyptic thinking has such scope and intensity that it is incompatible with the sense of efficacy that might be held by the very persons that these narratives are attempting to reach. Perhaps even more concerning, there can be a strange and unanticipated symmetry between the way that the excuses generated by economic discounting and the hopelessness felt in the face of total system failure which can both undermine the basis for moral response and action and leave us trapped with our problems in the present moment.

One striking exception to this "tyranny of the contemporary" may lie with religious organisations, which, like cultural institutions concerned with heritage, think differently about time, community and responsibility. This is because their mission is to "engage the weight of the past in the present."[3] On the basis of this conviction, a group of researchers at the University of Edinburgh embarked in 2013 on a research project which we called "Ancestral Time". As we put it in our project proposal, this title: > . . . was meant to invoke the awareness of past time in the present which can be shown in the medieval Christian spiritual disposition which appreciated the way that debts to past and future generations of humans are honoured. The Christian understanding of time is shaped by a conception of intergenerational community, known as the 'communion of saints'. In this idea present generations are conscious of the presence of the past and of their consequent debts both to the dead and of their legacy and responsibilities to future generations. Hence the earliest traces of the human built environment in Scotland are ancient memorials to the dead, such as the neolithic cairns on Orkney.[4]

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[1] Stephen Mark Gardiner, A perfect moral storm: the ethical tragedy of climate change, (Oxford University Press, 2011).

[2] Robert Gifford, "The dragons of inaction: psychological barriers that limit climate change mitigation and adaptation," *American Psychologist* 4 (2011): 293.

[3] Michael Northcott, "Ancestral Time project proposal" (unpublished), November 2012.

[4] I'm indebted to my colleagues on the Ancestral Time project who were co-authors of our project proposal (particularly our project's Primary Investigator and leader Prof Michael

In our research, we sought to explore whether traces of these past dispositions might exist in contemporary spiritual communities, particularly in the motives, practices and values of climate activists who are also members of religious communities in Scotland. The five members of our field-research team conducted interviews and observation at 42 different sites across Scotland and England, particularly groups involved in the ecumenical charity Eco-Congregation Scotland.

Two years later, with our fieldwork complete and work underway synthesising our data, our conclusions are complex. On the most literal level, I found in my interviews and site-visits that the presence of the dead is barely felt in most Scottish churches. This is likely a partial consequence of the beaurocratization of churchyard management which occurred in the latter decades of the 20th century when ownership of most of Scotland's churchyards (or "graveyards" in US vernacular) was turned over to local authorities. Lest anyone assume that this is a mere formality and doubt the full estrangement of churches from proximal places of burial, an interaction we had with one Eco-Congregation group we interviewed reveals the full lack of jurisdiction. This church in question had developed an extensive herb gardening project in the historic churchyard adjoining their church building which was used for therapeautic purposes. Even after gaining special permission to garden among the graves, they were forced to enter into protracted negotiations with the local council authority in order to ensure that groundskeepers avoided spraying with glysophate and other herbicides.[5]

The "ground" for this 20th century beurocratisation of burial in Scotland was likely prepared by a much earlier estrangement from dead "saints" which came with the reformation in Scotland. As historian Jane Dawson notes, Scottish reformers in the 16th century were particularly enthusiastic about cleansing churches of idolatry. This came in the form of "dramatic and forceful iconoclasm."[6] Further,

> The destruction of the setting, furnishings and equipment of Catholic worship was a central element within the Protestant message, emphasising the self-consciously radical break with the past and rejection of gradual or compromise reform... For Protestant enthusiasts the artistic destruction had nothing to do with taste or preference; the point was to rid the kingdom of 'idolatry', the worship of anything other than God, which they identified with the use of images, association with the saints, and with the Mass.[7]

The impact of this cleansing would have been, as Dawson puts it, "shocking and disorientating" with a striking visual evacuation akin to blindness. This

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Northcott) for my conceptualisation of the problem here and the narrative which I've replicated from our 2012 project proposal.

[5] Kidwell field notes, 31 July 2015.

[6] Jane E. A. Dawson, *Scotland Re-Formed 1488-1587*, (Edinburgh University Press: 2007), p. 224.

[7] Dawson, ibid.

rupture with the past "ushered into Scottish life a new ordering of time and space" (226). It is important to underline the degree to which reformation involved a dissasociation with the dead. As Geary puts it, "reformers rejected the involvement of the dead in the affairs of the living."[8]

Our fieldwork with Scottish churches confirmed that this divorce was indeed realised and persists in Scottish churches. Among more than three dozen semi-structured interviews, we did not come across a single mention of past persons as carrying some relevance to environmental concern. In contrast, several interviewees did mention future generations as a motivation for concern. As "Richard" put it,

> saving the planet, good stewardship, climate change; yeah that is the bottom line for me, which comes to the same thing. It is what we are doing to the earth but also what we are handing on to our children. Thinking ahead a couple of generations what will it be like, what are we doing, what basis are we doing that? you feel these economic arguments and you know it will be really difficult to do it - but try not doing it and see what it is like in 50 years time. . . "[9]

Important here is the way in which Richard entangles different modes of concern: future generations, one's own progeny, the less familial and more economic frame of stewardship and the "creaking" economy are all mixed together in a composite of various modes of future concern. In another interview, "Eduard" juxtaposed climate apocalyptic with a more extended intergenerational concern:

> I think (ecocongregations) is an aspect of the church and it is very topical at the moment. . . every time you pick up the paper it was about global emissions and if you can believe it 'we are all doomed'. . . you can be flippant about it but it is a serious issue and we owe it to our children and grandchildren to be sensible and not be burning lights all the time. . . we all have to be conscious of these things.

In a similarly stewardship-oriented way, "Samantha" described the way in which their green team attempted to integrate environmental concern in a worship service. In her recollection,

> one of the early ecoservices we did. . . and that was one of the things we pushed that was the title of one service, that small things can make a difference. . . there is a passage in our most recent service

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[8]Patrick J. Geary, Living with the dead in the Middle Ages, (Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 2.

[9]Quotes are drawn from interviews conducted by myself and Michael S. Northcott between 2014-2015. The names of all research participants mentioned in this chapter have been modified, but wherever possible indication of gender has been preserved.

again emphasising this message and talking of stories in the past emphasising the effects that our actions now will have on our children and grandchildren.

The relatively narrow frame of reference to the present generation and future concern for "children and grandchildren" does not necessarily mean that these groups we interviewed failed to express a break with the short-termism which has been identified in so many quarters as problematic. In several cases, interviewees highlighted the ability of religious communities to transcend the current short-termist culture and it's inabilities to focus on long-term environmental care and ultimately climate change mitigation.

In one example, "Naomi" highlighted the problem of short-termism and noted the way in which she saw church as "transcending" that "short term vision":

> This question of short-termism is one of the curses of society because government at the national level... so the short-termism at the national level governs what happens at the lower level, like local councils, and that naturally seeps down into communities because people say well why should I bother..we only need to do this to get to this point and we will wait and see what happens..and I think this is one of the benefits of the church because it can transcend that short term vision of what is there and say well actually our vision is longer term and it comes from much further back and there is this continuum going forward.

"Alison" provided similar commentary:

> I think... Eco-Congregation expresses my long term feeling about the environment. I'm doing this because this is something I'm committed to forever, whereas political things are all short-term. And what I've noticed is that people who are in eco-congregations have this long term vision. They're talking about their grandchildren and those kind of things. I find myself talking about my grandchildren... This is a way of expressing my long-term view, on sustainability issues.

To generalise what I have presented thus far, what we found were that a small subset of our interview subjects made some reference to a long-term temporal horizon. Far more frequent was some form of environmental altruism for present persons, i.e. coastal peoples, Malawians impacted by drought, and other climate refugees. In another article, my research collaborator Michael Northcott describes these as "descendant time" and "presentism".[10] This is typified in one response from "Jamie":

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[10] Michael S Northcott, "Neoliberal (Mis)Management of Earthly Time and the Ethics of Climate Justice" in Colleen Murphy and Robert McKim (eds.) Climate Change and Its Impacts: Risks and Inequalities (New York: Springer, 2017).

there is the saving God's planet part. People buy into that quite strongly... they look outwards a lot..overseas... we have to look at this planet... we are trying to look after a planet that our grandchildren are going to live in and to ensure they are not going to get flooded, or have drought, there are wars over water... the sea level is rising round about Scotland... people can see there is climate change"

Setting aside references such as this to present altruism, the select references to a long-term temporal outlook that we have presented here were correlated with an awareness that this perspective involved a certain amount of transcendence over modern short-termism and climate apocalypticism. Rather than speak of the coming environmental apocalypse, research subjects expressed skepticism and caution about our capabilities of future prediction, and in turn a concern about the presence of "environmental apocalyptic" in popular media and broader environmental discourse.

Perhaps most noteworthy, this skepticism about prognostication could even come in the form of skepticism about the reliability of projections by climatologists (i.e. "if you can believe it 'we are all doomed'"). My tentative interpretation of this skepcism is that it presented a form of caution not for its own sake, or in light of other competing interests (i.e. the economy and its relation to fossil fuel developments), but rather was linked to a desire for moderation in public discourse. In some cases, this was even based on concern for effective "witness" based on the presumption that the church is (or should be) a moderate public voice. Seen in relation to this conservative posture, we can see the notion of transcendence is actually a form of political moderation. In other words, the church may "transcend" the constraints of current discourse because of its existence across a long temporal horizon (both past and present). Seen in this way, we can affirm that environmentalists in some Scottish churches *do indeed* carry an exceptional temporality that can surmount short-termism, temporal myopia and forms of apocalypticism which can creep into the environmental discourse.

However, it is equally important to emphasise the degree to which the long-term concern expressed by our respondents would likely be unsatisfying for many environmental philosophers invested in the intergenerational ethics project. This is because so much of the locus of concern centred around "children" and "grandchildren". The broader intergenerational project, with its Kantian and Rawlsian roots represents a more extreme form of long-term temporal orientation, pushing past concern for one's observable descendants towards concern (and even the bestowal of rights) for persons who are not yet born and may be quite temporally distant.[11] A noteworthy critique of this approach comes from

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[11] For one example, see Rachel Muers, *Living For the Future : Theological Ethics for Coming Generations*, (T & T Clark, 2008). Other noteworthy examples of an inter-generational ethic are Gardiner's proposal cited above and the Brundtland Commission report *Our Common Future* (Oxford University Press, 1987).

philosopher Derek Parfit. In his account of what he calls the "non-identity problem" Parfit suggests that we struggle to reckon with future generations in our daily decisions (especially ones which involve sacrifice) precisely because, put briskly, those persons do not exist.[^163231648] Some of the reason that these ultra-long timescales have proven appealing is precisely because the Kantian departure from human-scale temporality matches a geological outlook. As we focus our attention on the creation of geological deposits that become fuel and the burning of fuels which become inputs into the climate system and which carry impactful inertia across centuries, environmental philosophers have sought to escape the limits of human-scale time which appears dramatically myopic in the face of the temporality of environmental change.

What is unexpected, but possible instructive about these findings is that they match a broader trend in the social anthropology of time that offers a similar challenge to the intergenerational project. Starting with E. E. Evans-Pritchard's study of the Nuer (1940), a range of Social anthropologists studying temporality have suggested that the crucial question is to examine "time depth". As Evans-Pritchard puts it,

> In theory . . . one might reckon time in sets to an indefinite period, but in fact Nuer generally know only the latest of the sets the members of which are all dead or, if they know the names of several vanished sets, are uncertain of their order and do not use them for purposes of time-reckoning. An age-set reckoning has, therefore, seven units covering a period of about ninety years." (211)

> What strikes one most about the time dimension of this Nuer world are its narrow limits . . . If we are right in supposing that lineages never extend beyond ten to twelve generations it follows that the distance between the beginning of the world and the present day remains an unalterable distance" (215)[12]

Returning to the start of this chapter, the take-away here is that as we seek to improve our engagement with the general public on climate change, we would be well-served to narrate the nature of the problem and the reasons for its urgency in *human* terms. Though this sounds like an obvious point, it is important to note that a significant quantity of mobilisation and climate change communication to-date have characterised climate change in decidedly inhuman terms: in spans of time that the human mind cannot meaningfully comprehend without recourse to abstraction; through scales that simply do not map onto human persons or communities; and with the expectancy of intensities of action that cannot be sustained across real human relationships either with one another for with the

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[12]E. E. Evans-Pritchard, "Nuer time-reckoning", *Africa* 12 (1939): 189–216. For further analysis of time-depth and climate change, see Richard Irvine, "Deep Time: An Anthropological Problem," *Social Anthropology* 2 (2014): 157-172.

places we inhabit. If we are to take the preliminary findings that I have presented in this chapter seriously, then we must recalibrate our expectations of activists. The surprising result of this is that we may end up finding that remarkable tools for climate change mitigation are already in hand if only we look for them on their own terms.

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