

Editorial: Discovering a Robust Hope for Life on a Fragile Planet

Margot R Hodson*

This edition of *Anvil* presents papers that have come out of an environmental consultation on the issue of ‘Hope’. The project began through a chance conversation between me and Ruth Valerio^a at the 2010 conference of the Society for the Study of Christian Ethics, which was on the theme of ‘Climate Change’. We both regularly share platforms with environmental speakers who present a bleak picture of the state of the planet. We follow and our role is to present Christian hope. As the environmental situation deteriorated, so our hope had become less proximate and more eschatological. It lacked reality and we were both struggling to find an authentic hope for this age.

As a result of that meeting, in October 2011, we gathered a group of key thinkers on Christianity and Environment for a 26-hour retreat. These were senior scientists, theologians and activists. We discovered that the majority shared our struggle and together we began to feel our way towards a more resilient hope that could sustain us in our contemporary situation. John Weaver’s paper: ‘Exploring Hope’ was based on the report from this gathering¹.

The second phase of the project was a gathering of a wider group of 60 specialists. These were staff workers from Tearfund, Christian Aid and A Rocha, alongside Diocesan Environmental Officers, academics and church leaders. Keynote speakers included Richard Bauckham², and Andy Atkins³. Both have papers in this journal. One of the sponsoring organisations, the John Ray Initiative, has a policy of always considering environmental theology in the light of sound science. For both gatherings, Martin Hodson was keynote speaker, giving the most up to date information in science and policy. His paper for *Anvil*

* The John Ray Initiative, Redcliffe College, Wotton House, Horton Road, Gloucester, GL1 3PT, UK. Email: margot.hodson@jri.org.uk

^a Dr Ruth Valerio is Theology Director for A Rocha UK, where she also leads their Living Lightly programme. She is a member of Spring Harvest leadership committee and trustee for the Evangelical Alliance.

provides the scientific context.⁴ He explains the major environmental problems that we face, and the view of hope in the scientific community.

The final stage of the project has been to consult with environmental theologians from the majority world. Archbishop Thabo Makgoba is chair of the 'Anglican Communion Environmental Network'.⁵ He has extensive experience of the Churches concern for the environment in Africa and at international level. Bishop Geoff Davies has given his retirement to issues of faith and environment, and is Executive Director of the Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI).⁶ Both bishops have contributed to this edition.

Defining hopes

As we progressed with the hope project, a taxonomy of hope began to emerge. First we need to distinguish between **ultimate** and **proximate hope**, and, in his paper, Richard Bauckham defines these terms and explores their relationship in depth. It is clear that ultimate hope sustains proximate hope. Taking 1 Cor. 13, he shows that it is love that empowers hope, and that faith, hope and love link together. Our situation requires a proximate hope that is realistic and can be communicated beyond the community of faith.

Proximate hope has several subdivisions. First there is '**optimistic hope**'. This encourages us to work to solve the challenges that we face. Sir John Houghton (in Martin Hodson's paper) demonstrates this hope in his three reasons for optimism about the future and climate change. Secondly, there is the opposite position of '**pessimistic hopelessness**'. This is felt by those who see the environmental problems as too big to be surmounted by humanity. A pessimistic hopelessness tends to lead toward fatalism and inaction in the face of impending difficulty. Martin Hodson writes of the culture of hopelessness among conservation biologists. Lost hope can also lead to a '**bright hopelessness**'. This is related to hedonism and is the 'eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die' approach (Isa. 22:13). Increasing numbers of people are responding to our environmental crisis in this way, with dangerous consequences. There is a third negative category of proximate hope and that is '**false hope**'. This is a category of people who either deny the problems, or continue to pedal optimistic hope, well beyond the time when it is practically tenable. Some environmental sceptics take this approach and John Weaver considers this in his paper.

As we seek ways to use these hopes wisely, Andy Atkins paper gives us insight into effective strategies for campaigning. The key psychology is to enable people to avoid

pessimistic and bright hopelessness, along with false hope. All these will lead to inaction. He gives strategies for encouraging optimistic hope with the aim of steering the course of the planet toward a more positive long-term future. He sees the need to help people through the difficult days ahead by giving smaller achievable goals.

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba writes about the South African experience when, following the end of apartheid, there was an expectation of utopian change that could not be met. He seeks to reveal a hope based on redemption that is tangibly grounded in reality. He describes the focus on the environment in the diocese of Niassa, in northern Mozambique, where they have been exploring the principles of 'Umoja,'^b seeking to share the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:1-5). This has led to holistic mission, community building, and a deepening of faith. Part of their focus has been on food security.

These practical examples from Andy Atkins and Archbishop Thabo demonstrate one further category of hope, which is an inherent part of all of the papers in this issue of *Anvil*. At each stage of the hope project, we found ourselves seeking a deeper and more resilient form of proximate hope. We have described it as '**robust hope.**' It is profoundly biblical, and is perhaps summarised best in Rom. 5:3-4, 'suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.' It is the Christian hope that enables the eschatological future to sustain hopeful living in the present in a way that leads to realism and not escapism. It is strong in the midst of difficulty and pain precisely because of the resurrection hope of life from death.

There is a relationship between robust hope and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's concept of grace. Bonhoeffer described 'Costly grace' as the Incarnation of God.⁷ Robust hope is earthed in an understanding of the incarnation of Christ, who loved his whole cosmos so much that he came to live among us, suffer, die and rise again. It is based on faith in a risen Christ who 'holds creation together' (Col. 1:17), even as it groans waiting for liberation (Rom. 8:18-25). Robust hope has a secure understanding of ultimate hope, when heaven and earth shall be renewed and restored (Rev. 21-22). Robust hope makes ultimate hope visible in real and tangible ways in the present. It is a hope of perseverance. The more severe our present reality becomes, the more robust hope is made visible. In his recent book on the Ethics of Hope, Jürgen Moltmann describes Bonhoeffer as one of the few modern pietistic German theologians who developed a theology of the earth.⁸ Bonhoeffer's concept of the kingdom of God as the 'kingdom of the resurrection of the world' led him to a more

^b This is an incultured form of Appreciative Inquiry, named from the Swahili word for having a common mind.

collective and earthed theology than was common in Protestant thinking in the mid twentieth century. His high view of creation led to his emphasis on incarnational theology and impelled him to engage fully with this world. In a letter to a friend from prison in 1944, Bonhoeffer wrote that far from removing people from the world, costly grace sends the Christian disciple back into the world to follow Christ there and demonstrate his love. This is the only way that we learn to have faith.⁹ Costly grace is the foundation and the source of robust hope, (Rom. 5:1-5). In our discipleship, we are called back into the world to suffer, persevere, gain character and discover hope. Through the hope project, we have found that this has been our shared experience as scientists, environmental activists, theologians and Church leaders. I trust that the papers in this issue of *Anvil* will help to resource all those who are seeking hope in the midst of environmental difficulty.

The Environment and Hope Project- Supporting Organisations

Ruth Valerio and I, as organisers behind the Environment and Hope project are grateful to three organisations for their support. The Jerusalem Trust provided financial support for the first ‘Hope Gathering’ in October 2011, and A Rocha UK and the John Ray Initiative (JRI) for the ‘Communicating Hope’ conference at High Leigh in May 2011. They are particularly grateful to the JRI staff who provided logistical and administrative support for both meetings.

The John Ray Initiative (JRI) is an educational charity with a vision to bring together scientific and Christian understandings of the environment in a way that can be widely communicated and lead to effective action. It was formed in 1997 in recognition of the urgent need to respond to the global environmental crisis and the challenges of sustainable development and environmental stewardship. JRI’s mission is to promote responsible environmental stewardship in accordance with Christian principles and the wise use of science and technology. Address: The John Ray Initiative, Redcliffe College, Wotton House, Horton Road, Gloucester, GL1 3PT, UK. Tel: +44 7583 481759, Email: admin@jri.org.uk, Website: <http://www.jri.org.uk/>

A Rocha UK is a Christian charity working for the protection and restoration of the natural world, both as a response to the biblical mandate to care for the earth, and as a demonstration of the Christian hope for God’s world. They do this through our practical involvement in nature conservation projects and ecological research, by campaigning on biodiversity issues, and by engaging with churches, schools, communities and individuals – educating, equipping and inspiring them to delight responsibly in, and to participate in caring

for, the earth and its resources. Part of the worldwide family of A Rocha organisations committed to conservation action as an expression of Christian mission, they work collaboratively with others who share their passion for the planet and our desire for its flourishing. Address: A Rocha UK, 18–19 Avenue Road, Southall, UB1 3BL, UK. Tel: +44 208 574 5935, Email: uk@arocha.org Website: <http://www.arocha.org/gb-en/index.html>

The Jerusalem Trust has as its objectives: to advance the Christian religion and to promote Christian organisations and the charitable purposes and institutions they support; and to advance Christian education and learning. Website: <http://www.sfct.org.uk/the-jerusalem-trust/>

The Hope Project is also grateful for the support of **SAFCEI** (Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute). Bishop Geoff Davies presents a short paper to explain their work.

Biography



Margot Hodson is an environmental theologian and a church minister. She is Vicar of the Haddenham Benefice in Buckinghamshire UK and was previously Chaplain of Jesus College, Oxford. She is on the boards of The John Ray Initiative and A Rocha UK, and the Ethics Editorial Group for Grove Books. Margot has published widely, including ‘*Uncovering Isaiah's Environmental Ethics*’ (2011) Grove Booklet E161; and ‘Storm clouds and mission: creation care and environmental crisis’ in B.E. Woolnough & W. Ma (Eds.) *Holistic Mission. God's Plan for God's People*. (2010) Oxford: Regnum Books International.

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⁷ Bonhoeffer, D. (1959). *The Cost of Discipleship*. New York: SCM.

⁸ Moltmann, J. (2012). *The Ethics of Hope*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, p.118.

⁹ Bonhoeffer, D. (1971). *Letters and Papers from Prison*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co.