

A Rocha International: Championing Christian Hope in the Environmental Crisis

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South African Christians are facing one of the gravest challenges in history. Never before have we had a clearer understanding of the environmental fragility of our country. The *South African Environment Outlook Report* of 2006, a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary scientific report on the present state of South Africa's soil, air, water, and social and economic viability, was published in July 2007 by the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT).¹ The report presents a scientific profile of South Africa's rapidly disappearing arable soil and potable water, fast declining air quality, and increasingly fragmented natural habitats where growing numbers of flora and fauna are critically endangered. Dr. John Ledger, one of the world's most respected conservationists, recently commented on the Report and demonstrated that members of the South African government are exacerbating a potentially critical situation by fast tracking grants of mining concessions in the name of "development" and "social upliftment". Ledger's evidence suggests that the Department of Minerals and Energy (DME) is actually undermining constitutional safeguards for environmental protection and seriously endangering South Africa's long term ecological sustainability.²

Exploitative economic activities causing the collapse of marine fisheries, polluted rivers, contaminated soil and ground water, poisoned air, and declining food security, are not unique to South Africa. Economics as the main cause of climate change degradation topped the agenda of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland in January 2008, demonstrating that environmental degradation has now become a global concern.³ The onset of climate change was scientifically contested a decade ago, however, the uncomfortable truth that unchecked "greenhouse gas" pollution over the last century, correlates to a consistent annual

¹ Donald Gibson and Darryn Killian, chief researchers of the report, introduced it to the general public in an article, "SA's spreading human footprint threatens to overwhelm resources", *Sunday Independent*, 22 July 2007. Free copies of the South Africa Environment Outlook Report can be obtained from DEAT: wdesmore@deat.gov.za.

² Ledger shows how the DME has designed a way to bypass the environmental controls of DEAT and the National Environmental Management Act: "Is South Africa Sliding Into Unsustainability?" *Vision: People and Conservation in Africa*, Issue 5, December/January 2008, p. 14 – 16. A current example of DME's contraventions is found in BirdLife South Africa's Press Statement of 7 Feb.2008, available on request: www.birdlife.org.za. BirdLife reported to the press that the DME did not comply with legislation to advertise or convene a public consultation process before granting Delta Mining Company rights to prospect for torbanite and coal in the Ekgangala grasslands of the Wakkerstroom and Luneburg area – the most biodiverse Highveld wetland systems remaining in S.A.

³ See, http://www.weforum.org/en/media/Latest%20Press%20Releases/AM07_climate_change

increase in global temperatures, is now widely accepted, especially after the box office success of Al Gore's film, *An Inconvenient Truth*.⁴ The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami which affected tens of thousands of rural coastal communities in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Ethiopia and Kenya and the climate events that have battered New Orleans, Bangladesh, Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique are drawing the world's attention to climate change and its greatest negative impact on the poorest communities. For millions who have recently lost loved ones and livelihoods this is a moment of deep despair but all around the world Christians are being challenged to remember hope for creation presented in Scripture, hope in God who created the world, loves it, and holds a wonderful future purpose for it. This resurgence of Christian hope has encouraged the growth of Christian organizations such as A Rocha International, a Christian conservation organization working to show God's love for the whole of creation.⁵

From Portugal to the World

A Rocha began in Portugal near a place called Quinta da Rocha, "The Estate of the Rock", in 1983. An Anglican curate, Peter Harris, his wife Miranda, and their three children were sent by a mission agency in England to the Algarve coast on the Mediterranean, not to plant a church, but to save a fragile estuary.⁶ The HARRISES answered God's call on their lives to work for the protection of a wilderness, where birds migrating every year from northern Europe to southern Africa and beyond, stop to rest and "refuel" on their long journey. Within nine years the Harris' home became the hub of activity for one of Europe's most important bird observatories. Visiting scientists and students recorded data to research the distances and flight paths of nature's long distance athletes, like Sandpipers, Avocets, Black Terns, Caspian Terns, and Storm Petrels.

As A Rocha's story unfolded in Portugal, five key words began to be used to capture the essence of the Harris' work in their small community at Cruzinha: *Christian, Conservation, Cross-Cultural, Community and Co-operation*. Since 1997 the pattern begun by the Harris family has been replicated 17 times, as A Rocha multiplied into a worldwide family of organizations, demonstrating a Christian presence in conservation and scientific research, through cross-cultural

⁴ A lay person's introduction to the science of climate change is presented in Eugene Moll's, "What is all this fuss about climate change?", *Veld & Flora, Journal of the Botanical Society of South Africa*, Vol. 93 (3), September 2007, p.153-156.

⁵ See www.arocha.org

⁶ The story is told with simplicity and great humour in Peter Harris' two books, *Under the Bright Wings*, Regent College Publishing, Vancouver, B.C., 1993, and *Kingfisher's Fire, A story of hope for God's earth*, Monarch Books, Oxford, U. K. 2008.

work in local communities. No matter whether it is helping rural communities derive sustainable livelihoods from the last forests of the Kenyan coast, inspiring inner-city neighbourhoods in Southall to transform an abused car boot sale ground into a wild park, assisting rural villagers in India to reduce conflict with wild elephants, restoring habitats of the Sockeye Salmon in British Columbia, or motivating farmers in France and Lebanon to improve the health of wetlands,⁷ A Rocha's work is based on the biblical conviction that everything on Earth belongs to God (Psa. 24:1) and that Christians should be custodians who demonstrate God's love for creation.

A Rocha in South Africa

A Rocha South Africa began in 2004 with a project along one of South Africa's hardest working and most polluted rivers, the Msunduzi. The Living Msunduzi Waterways Project in Pietermaritzburg's inner city aims to transform the river environment from being a health hazard and a crime ridden no-go area, into a safe, beautiful and biodiverse community asset, for recreation, employment creation and tourism.⁸ Since becoming a registered Non Profit Organization in 2006, A Rocha's work has grown to include *Phila Endalweni-Creation Alive* environment education clubs in five primary school settings, a carbon banking project, and community conservation groups in three locations around the country.⁹ While A Rocha South Africa's membership and national profile are still small, the organization aims to grow into a national conservation organization that provides Christians of all denominations and cultural backgrounds lively opportunities for conservation and creation care.

A Rocha's increasing capacity worldwide is a hopeful sign that communities really make a difference to mitigate the effects of the environmental crisis. A second way of championing hope is A Rocha's contribution to theological discussion about the environment. A Rocha publications, international theological conferences and workshops are a way of reminding the Church that Christians have often forgotten the Doctrine of Creation, which is integral to faith and life.¹⁰ The remainder of this paper will explore the hope for creation presented in biblical theology. I will first describe some challenges to building foundations of a sound theology of creation.

⁷ Each story of community conservation by Christians in A Rocha around the world can be found on the national pages of A Rocha international website: www.arocha.org

⁸ See: <http://en.arocha.org/safrica/index2.html>

⁹ See: <http://en.arocha.org/safrica/index4.html>

¹⁰ For a catalogue of A Rocha's books, CD's, posters and publications see: <http://en.arocha.org/res/index.html>

Then I will suggest four key elements that are essential for a biblical doctrine of creation.¹¹

Foundations of a Theology of Creation

Where do we start a theology of creation when we are so aware of creation groaning (Rom.8: 18-25). We could pose the problem differently: How is it possible for millions of Chinese children to believe that the “universe is friendly”¹² when they rarely see the stars or the sun, as casualties of urban China’s excessive fossil fuel pollution? Is it possible to enjoy a platter of fish with a clear conscience, in the escalating choice of globally franchised fish restaurants, when we now know that worldwide demand for “convenience fish” is driving commercial species to the brink of extinction?¹³ How do we raise children to have a sense of hope in South Africa’s future if the possibility of failing food security, uncontrolled HIV infections and massive heavy metal contamination of our country’s rivers and food chains becomes reality?¹⁴ How do we immediately encounter the Creator in his love when all we see in creation are the scars of abuse and exploitation? Our viewing point onto creation is after The Fall (Gen. 3), that moment when humanity’s sin affected creation history, therefore it is hard to imagine a perfect creation, lovingly and newly made. Dr. James Houston poses the problem of perceiving creation yet another way:

The world we see is the mirror image of our hearts. We perceive reality as we conceive it to be. If we have given up hope of finding meaning in our lives, then we see the world as a desert, a threatening wilderness, If, however, we have hope in God the Creator of all things, then we can , and shall, see it very differently. We are always experiencing two landscapes at the same time: the landscape before our eyes – the phenomenal world – and the landscape in our minds, what the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins has called ‘inscape’. The one is constantly interacting with the other. If, therefore, we conceive the world to be a desert, we also make it such...That is why symbols and other forms of imagery have such powerful effects

¹¹ The invitation to present this paper has been humbling because my reading as yet includes too few Roman Catholic scholars. With the exception of the early Fathers, particularly Irenaeus, Augustine, and the Cappadocians who are respected ecumenically as authorities on the Doctrine of Creation, I have read only Hans Urs von Balthazar. The theology I present in the section which follows is indebted to all of these great men of faith, as well as leading contemporary Protestant scholars, particularly James Houston, Iain Provan, Vinoth Ramachandra, Loren Wilkensen and Dave Diewert, with whom I studied, and whose essays on the Doctrine of Creation are published in *CRUX*, the Journal of Theology of Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia.

¹² I believe this was said by Dag Hammarskjöld

¹³ See Jaco Barendse’s research article “Ocean Alert: Getting to know your seafood before it is too late!” in *African Wildlife Magazine*, Winter 2007, p. 28-30.

¹⁴ See Liando Rostoll’s article “Water Worry, Government battle to comply with own legislation at derelict mines, *Creamer Media’s Mining Weekly*, ONLINE, http://www.miningweekly.co.za/article.php?a_id=124708

*upon man and his world. Images such as the garden, the wilderness, the sea, mountains, and the city frame so much of our imagination. But back of them all, either we are possessed by our images, or we are possessed by our Creator, of whom no graven image can be made.*¹⁵

It is important not to turn a deaf ear to creation's "groaning", but we should not allow the disturbing images of an increasingly toxic world to obscure our view of the wondrous canvas the Bible paints of God's good earth, created for his glory out of the depths of his love (Gen. 1:26). The challenge for us even at this moment of climate collapse, is always to believe, trust and encounter this Creator God of love, and to re-envision the beleaguered world we see today with God's eyes, as *he* created it. Remembering creation's original perfection is an act of prophetic courage and hope, because we interpret creation's present "groaning" in light of the glorious purpose for creation revealed by the Creator in Scripture. To explore this basis of Christian hope in our present crisis I will now suggest four essential elements for a theology of Creation.

Element One: Begin with the Who? and not the How?

As James Houston wrote, we never truly understand the meaning and purpose of creation and life if we do not begin with the God of love. Viewing creation from its true starting point, in the purpose of God the Creator, is common in the Psalms. Psalm 104, which retells the Genesis 1 and 2 creation stories in song, exemplifies this correct starting point for understanding creation. It opens with a sweeping view onto creation from Heaven downwards. We are taken up beyond space and time into God's holy presence and made aware of who God is in himself (vs. 1). The next four verses (vs. 2-5) mirror the divine speech events that spoke creation into existence (Gen. 1) and reveal the mysterious prequel to creation history: God who is eternally Three persons in community, and yet One, decides to enter space and time, into relationship with creatures he will create! The eternal God reaches out of himself to be in community, to relate in an economy with his creation. This almost hidden moment in Psalm 104 is the Divine love-initiative that is the prequel but also the subtext of creation history.

If we build our theology of creation, like Psalm 104, from the starting point of the mystery of God in himself, we will understand the two stories of creation (Gen. 1-2:3 and Gen. 2:4-25) without falling into the trap of modernity's *how questions*.¹⁶ The instrumentalist focus of *how?* misses the meaning of these texts and diverts

¹⁵ James Houston, *I Believe in the Creator*, W.B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids MI, 1980, p.15.

our attention into speculations about time and method and process. If we discipline ourselves not to read Genesis like a modern scientific textbook, and notice the true focus of the text on God in himself, we can be true to the ancient intention of Genesis to answer the *who question* – who does this Creator God reveal himself to be? This starting point is also the right foundation to find answers to our deepest *why questions*, and so uncover God’s secret purpose for making his creation. Beginning a theology of creation with God and his purposes will also become a prophetic challenge to the modern worlds’ socio-economic exploitation and destruction of the environment. We will find ourselves witnessing to the powers, that God the Creator loves and is known by every creature on Earth (Ps. 104:27).

Element Two: Remember Human Creatureliness

Just as it is difficult to picture a perfect creation before human sin changed history, it is hard to visualize humankind in Eden, perfect creatures among many other creatures. Genesis and the Psalms describe human identity at this moment of perfection before the Fall, and emphasize that human beings at creation are closely related to all other living creatures on Earth, in nearly every way. All creeping things were made with dust and Spirit (Ps. 104:29-30), and all on the sixth day (Gen.1:26-31), and God calls all of these dust-and-Spirit creatures “very good” when he had finished creating (vs.31).

However, human creatureliness *is* distinct from the creatureliness of other animals in one key respect. God creates only humankind as persons who reflect *his* personhood. Human beings are created as God’s vice-regents, his divine image bearers (Gen 1:26-27). The Bible presents the *imago dei* as created by God in humankind, and expressed in two ways. Firstly, God’s image is expressed when humanity exercises loving dominion over creation in caring stewardship (Gen 1:28-30; 2:15). Secondly, God’s image is expressed in human sexuality, as boys, girls, men and women discover their unique identity, and live out their masculine and feminine interdependence and complimentarity in family bonds, friendship and also in marriage (Gen 1:27; 2:21-24). This biblical understanding of the perfect image of God expressed in human stewardship and relationships is hard for us to visualize today, because moderns have devised schemes to forget creatureliness in the ongoing project to harness and dominate every last frontier of the natural

¹⁶ The discussion of Genesis here is indebted to Iain Provan’s Old Testament theology classes at Regent College. My use of “modernity” and “moderns” in this paper refers to “postmodernity”. I concur with Craig Gay, Philip Sheldrake and David Wells that postmodernity is really an extension of modernity. See Craig Gay, *THE way of the (modern) world, Or, Why It’s Tempting to Live As If God Doesn’t Exist*, W. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1998, Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology, Christian Living and the Doctrine of God*, Darton Longman & Todd, 2004, p. 6-32, and David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow’rs, Christ in a Postmodern World*, W. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2005.

world. Moderns are also the first generation to deconstruct masculinity and femininity in human identity and reject monogamous marriage as the building block for a harmonious society.¹⁷ As we discover the Bible's theology of human creatureliness we are given the antidote to the ecological and social anarchy that increasingly characterizes modern economics, social life and personal experience, and we rediscover what it means to relate to creation, and fellow human beings as image-bearers of the loving, sustaining Creator God of Psalm 104.

Element Three: Keep Christ and Creation Together

Moderns tend to separate the physical realm from the spiritual, the body from the soul. For many reasons moderns forget that Jews and early Christians could never picture Heaven and Earth as separate. The heavens and the earth were one inseparable creation of God, just as dust and Spirit were mingled to create the human being as an inseparable whole (Gen.2:6). The mystery of Christ in creation is that the incarnation joins Heaven and Earth all the more inseparably. God enters creation in Christ, who takes on human creatureliness though he is not created himself. Christ is "eternally begotten, not made",¹⁸ yet he takes on human creatureliness in every other respect: our locatedness in geographic place, our cultural identity and history, our embodiment and sexuality, our moral accountability, our wills, emotions, and intellect, and even our creaturely mortality (Philippians 2: 5-11). Jesus adopts creatureliness in birth, childhood, adult life, death and resurrection, and in his embodied ascension into Heaven. Thus, the Gospel story gives us a mysterious answer to our *why questions* and tells us the greatest secret of history (Mark 4:11, 1 Cor. 2:7-10). In Christ, God destroys the power of sin (Eph. 2:16, Col. 2:14) lifts the curse on creation (Rev. 22:3 cf. Rom. 8:20, Gen. 3:17), makes creation holy (John 17:19, 1 Tim 4:5) and reconciles everything in creation to himself (Col. 1:15-20). In other words, in the story of Christ and in true encounter with Jesus, God's will to reconcile creation is done on Earth, as he had planned in Heaven. In the face of global extinctions and environmental contamination, this Christian hope is unique. Christians can live with courage and grace knowing that Christ will not separate himself from his holy purpose for creation. Christians hoping this scandalous hope know *why* we find ourselves here at this challenging moment - to live out Christ's goal of reconciling all things in creation to God (Eph. 1:9-12).

Element Four: Live Towards the New Creation

¹⁷ Wendell Berry explores modernity's exchange of the private mystery of sexuality for a public showcase, and shows how this mirrors the similar demise of integrity, freedom and community in economics and agriculture in modern America. See Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community*, Pantheon Books, N.Y., 1992.

¹⁸ From the opening clauses of the Nicene Creed.

The crown of a theology of creation is The Revelation of St John with its climactic vision of the garden city, the New Creation (Rev. 21–22).¹⁹ The New Jerusalem, as we might expect, brings together imagery of both Heaven and Earth. The Holy City appears in the clouds, yet descends to the New Earth as an urban metropolis that is simultaneously a bountiful garden. The city is also described *as* its residents, white-robed, the bride of Christ (Rev. 21:2) and, as a wetland biosphere like the river Ezekiel was shown, flowing out of Jerusalem, reviving the water of the Dead Sea to teem with biodiversity (Rev. 22:1ff. cf. Ez. 47). This closing vision of Revelation is a glimpse into the never-ending terminus of creation's history. When we remember the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Zechariah we glimpse continuity here between our present earth, sky, children, fruits, grains, and animals, and the New Creation with all its creatures finally freed of the curse, healed, transformed and made new. The way the New Testament describes Christians' baptismal identity in Christ in the present (2 Corinthians 5:17, Heb. 12:18-29), using imagery of the future consummation of creation in Revelation, is an invitation to us in our theology and spirituality to anticipate the New Creation, and make room for the Holy Spirit to transform our present experience into a foretaste of the imminent final reconciliation between God and all of Creation.

Hope Against Hope²⁰

By discussing the conservation mission work of A Rocha International and suggesting elements of a truly biblical Doctrine of Creation this paper has celebrated the certain hope Christians hold for creation. Perseverance in this hope is the greatest challenge Christians will face in the unfolding environmental crisis - hope which is grounded in God himself, and bears no resemblance to the desperate, wishful, self-grounded hope of opportunistic industrialists or unscrupulous capitalists, politicians, developers and economists. More than ever before Christians need to be inspired by biblical hope to become the prophetic community in whom God's Kingdom increasingly extends throughout creation in loving communities and new just economics (Rom. 15:13). In God's Spirit of Hope, Christians can and must persevere, and so enter, in the common life of the Church, God's unfolding loving purpose, the eternal reconciliation of all things in his creation (Gal. 5:5).

¹⁹ In this section I have drawn from the exegesis of Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra, in Derek Tiball (ed.), *The Message of Mission, The Glory of Christ in all time and space, The Bible Speaks Today Series*, IVP, 2003.

²⁰ Rom. 4:18