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## Editorial

As the previous *Faith and Thought* (April 2020, No 68) announced, our symposium in May of this this year had to be cancelled, in the form of the physical meeting originally planned, because of Corona virus. This was perhaps appropriate, when its title had been 'The Christian Approach to Catastrophe'! However, we still held it on-line, and maybe enabled even greater participation thereby. Most of this issue is taken up with papers based on the various contributions.

In the same way, for many churches, being forced to cease meeting physically was at first distressing, but finding creative on-line solutions has led to some happy surprises. Once he had mastered how to assemble different contributions into a service on YouTube, my own pastor was delighted to find that more people seemed to be accessing it than ever came to our actual services!

We have now restarted a Sunday service in our building (socially distanced, with no singing) to cater for older folk who are not into the internet, and

have been pleasantly surprised at the congregation attending. But, we are still putting together a service on YouTube, for our new, on-line congregation.

You may have similar stories to tell. I hope so.

We (Faith and Thought Council) are now pondering what to do for our symposium next year.

We had been thinking of looking at Science Fiction from a theological perspective, but that did not seem to be coming together, and, in the meantime, the new ways of living out our faith called forth by Covid19 mean that our churches seem to be living Science Fiction.

Who knows what further challenges may confront us in coming years? (Some of them may be suggested by papers in this edition.) How will we meet them, in the Holy Spirit, under the Lordship of Christ? In what further ways will our churches need to 'think outside the box'?

So, how about ...

**Symposium 2021 (advance notice)**

**FUTURE  
CHURCH**

**Relevant? | Diverse? | Online?**

**Croxley Green Baptist Church, Hertfordshire, WD3 3LH**  
**Saturday 8th May 2021**

**Croxley is on the London Underground Metropolitan Line**

**Faith&Thought**  
RELATING ADVANCES IN KNOWLEDGE TO FAITH WITHIN SOCIETY

Bob Allaway

# **It's the end of the world as we know it. (Everything you ever wanted to know about the Book of Revelation)**

by **Simon Woodman**<sup>1</sup>,

revised from an essay appearing in "The Book of Revelation" by Paul  
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## **Introduction**

There have always been people who have sought to predict the date of the end of the world: from the prophecies of Nostradamus to the date-setting of American doomsday 'prophet' Harold Camping, from seventeenth-century millennialists to the tenth-century monk Joachim of Fiore, from the messianic prophets of first-century Judaism to the 2012 end of the Mayan calendar. There has never been a shortage of people predicting the end of the world. And yet, here we still are, and the world is still turning.

In the twentieth century, end of the world prophecies took a technological turn, and many who grew up in the shadow of the cold war genuinely feared the world might imminently end in nuclear holocaust. In the 1970s it was believed that the world was cooling and that a new ice age was coming (as Punk Rock group The Clash famously sang in their song *London Calling*). The current and genuine fears about global warming and climate change inspire similar levels of fear, anxiety, denial, or activism. And yet, for now, here we still are.

So far no-one has set a date which has been proved right, which ties in with something Jesus said, 'Not even I know the date and time my Father has set.' (Matthew 24:36).

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## End-times?

Many of those who have set dates, made films, or written books about the end of the world have claimed inspiration from the Book of Revelation. In fact, if you ask most people what they know about Revelation, one of the first things they will say is that it's about the end of the world. And it's true, there is a lot of imagery in Revelation that sounds pretty catastrophic ('apocalyptic', you might say, but we'll come to that shortly). However, is it actually accurate to say that Revelation is about the end of the world? Well, yes *and* no.

If what we mean is, 'Is the book of revelation a kind of "Dummies Guide" to the end of the world?', then no, it isn't. As those who have tried to make it such can show us, Revelation is no better at helping us predict the date of the end of the world than, say, Nostradamus! However, there may be another way Revelation can indeed speak to us very powerfully about the end of the world.

Have you ever heard someone say, perhaps after a tragic bereavement or a serious illness, 'it was the end of the world'? They clearly don't mean that the world has literally ended, and to assume they did would be to miss their point. What they mean is that the world as they knew it has gone, and they are now living in a new world, a world that is in a very real sense different to the world that they lived in before. Of course such world-ending, or world-transforming, events aren't always tragic or traumatic. Sometimes it can be a positive thing that ends one world and starts another: think of the unexpected lottery win, or falling in love, or becoming a parent. The old world ends, and a new world begins.

So when the Book of Revelation uses imagery and language about the end of the world, it is telling its readers that, if they understand its message, if they spend time with its prophetic images, they too will experience 'the end of the world' as their old world is brought to an end, and they find ourselves entering a new world in which Jesus Christ is at the centre of creation, drawing all things and all people to himself.

Those who have sought to confine Revelation to the realm of predictive prophecy make it of greatest relevance to those who find themselves living in the 'last days' of planet Earth. The difficulty with this is that they run the risk of alienating the book from the vast swathe of humanity (probably including ourselves, unless we really are the 'last generation') who have been born, lived, and died within the normal course of history. Christians usually assert that the Bible is of equal relevance to all, whether you live and die in the first, eleventh or twenty-first centuries.

So, if the Book of Revelation is to be of relevance to all generations, not just the last generation, and if it proclaims a message of world-ending significance rather than simply predicting the end of the world, what is it that is so special about the message of Revelation?

## **Audience**

A good place to start finding an answer to this question is to consider what significance and effect the book had on those for whom it was initially written. We are fortunate with Revelation because (unlike some other biblical books) we have a very clear understanding of the first recipients. This is because Revelation is a circular letter, written to be sent round seven churches in seven cities in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), and although the whole text is intended for each church, it begins with some short letters addressed to the seven churches individually (chs 2-3). These tell us that those who first read Revelation were a mixed group of Jews and Gentiles, living in fairly wealthy and cosmopolitan cities, fully integrated into the politics, economics and religions of the Roman Empire of the second half of the first century AD.

Those in the churches of the seven cities would have encountered the full force of the propaganda of the Roman Empire on a daily basis, with all aspects of culture from architecture to art, from finance to family life reinforcing the mythology of Rome, focussing around emperor worship and the Graeco-Roman pantheon of pagan gods. Anyone who wanted to worship Jesus as Lord was immediately putting themselves not only at odds with the dominant practices of society, but at odds with the empire itself,

which was a dangerous place to be. Only a few years before Revelation was written, the emperor Nero had systematically persecuted anyone who would not worship him, and had enacted a range of horrific punishments on those who refused to comply.

The author of Revelation is desperately concerned that those in the churches he is writing to do not compromise. But instead of simply writing a note saying, 'don't worship the emperor, don't give up, don't compromise', he sends them a captivating and riveting vision, which invites them to use their imaginations to see their world differently, to see through the lies and propaganda of the empire, and to live lives of devoted faithfulness to Jesus as the Lord of their lives.

## **Imagery**

As he writes, the author of Revelation casts his mind back to those times in the past when the people of God had struggled to remain faithful under the pressure to compromise with an oppressive empire. So he uses imagery from the Israelite enslavement in Egypt, painting pictures of sequences of plagues which echo the plagues that preceded Israel's release from Egyptian slavery. He also borrows imagery from the stories of the Israelite exile in Babylon, referencing the visions from the book of Daniel which speak of resistance to the empire and unswerving faithfulness to God.

Throughout Revelation, Rome is consistently referred to as 'Babylon', as the first century Roman empire is spoken of in terms of the ancient Babylonian empire. The invitation here is for readers in any century to identify the empires of their own day with the notorious hostile empires of the past.

## **Science fiction?**

The author borrows more than just language from the book of Daniel, he also borrows the style of writing known as *apocalyptic*. This was a genre greatly enjoyed by the Jews in the couple of hundred years before Revelation was written, and which functioned for them in a way not

dissimilar to how Science Fiction functions for us today. If we were to watch an episode of *Star Trek*, or a futuristic sci-fi film, we would know that what we were watching wasn't a detailed prediction of what the future would be like. Nor would we sit around trying to work out at what date it would all come true. As we sit here this evening, the year 2001 is firmly in the past, a date immortalised in the influential sci-fi novel of that name by Arthur C. Clarke and popularised by the Stanley Kubrick film. The fact that the events described in the novel and depicted in the film didn't happen by 2001 in no way robs them of their power, because they were never written as futuristic 'predictions' in the first place.

Sci-fi at its best is a literary genre that is set in an imaginary future in order to free people's minds from the trammels of their present lived reality, and to create the imaginative space for fresh reflection on issues which are of relevance to the real world of the here and now. This was how Apocalyptic functioned in the first century: it used futuristic, out-of-this-world images and stories to help those reading it to gain a new perspective on their lives.

It frequently used the literary device of a vision or dream to provide a context for the vivid images which depicted alternative ways of understanding the world. So a wicked empire might become a fantastical many-headed beast or a corrupt prostitute, while struggling churches might become shining stars or a faithful woman. The word 'apocalyptic' simply means 'revealed', (hence 'Revelation') and refers to the fact that this kind of literature is primarily about the 'revelation' of heavenly mysteries, passing on to its readers heaven's perspective on the earthly situation.

So the Book of Revelation begins with a vision of heaven, as the author, John, writes that he is caught up 'in the Spirit' and given a 'revelation' from God about the way the world really is. John's revelation can be summed up fairly easily: the emperor is not all-powerful, no matter how powerful he appears to be; the empire is not all-good, no matter how effective its propaganda; only God is all-powerful and all-good, and God is to be known through his Son, Jesus Christ, who is drawing the world to himself and will accompany all those who make the journey from enslavement under the empire to new life in Christ.

## **Contemporary perspectives**

One can imagine John, the Christian pastor responsible for the seven churches of Asia Minor, imprisoned on the prison island of Patmos, praying for those in his churches and meditating on his Jewish scriptures, especially the books of Exodus, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, each of which reflects on what it means to be faithful to God when the pressure is on to compromise with the forces of empire. As he brings his world before his scriptures, he has a moment of divine 'revelation': that the world is not as the world wants to be seen; that the empire is really satanic; that the emperor is not divine; that the churches of Christ are not insignificant; and that, despite appearances to the contrary, all is not lost. He then picks up his pen and starts writing his book, borrowing language, imagery and theology from the Jewish scriptures and beyond, but giving it all his own distinctive twist to make it relevant for his first century context. When we come to read Revelation today, we may find it helpful to do with John's text what he did with his own scriptures. That is, to bring our own world to the world of the text, submitting our lives to its imaginative and transformatory effects, learning to see the world the way John saw it, and in so doing gaining heaven's perspective on our own earthly situations.

## **How do we read Revelation?**

Well, we wouldn't read Paul's letters as if they were written for us today; instead, if we are responsible readers, we read them in their original context (of Corinth, or Philippi, or wherever). We might then, if we want to, begin to look for those places where the world of the original recipients touches our own world, and through these points of correspondence we may allow the ancient text to speak to our contemporary situation. If we take this same approach with Revelation, we might usefully ask ourselves where the 'empire' or 'Babylon' are to be found in our contemporary world, and we might ask where the propaganda of the 'empire' is most effective at seducing us into compromise, and we might ask where the suffering church is struggling to bear faithful witness to their faith in the face of seemingly overwhelming opposition.

In places like these, and many more, the vision of Revelation echoes down the centuries with a message as fresh and challenging as the day it was written.

### **Authorship**

There are many mysteries associated with the book of Revelation, not least who wrote it and when. The text itself gives us a name, saying it is a Revelation given to 'John', but the problem is that we don't know which 'John' this is.

Traditionally it was believed to have been John the brother of James and disciple of Jesus, who was also believed to have written 'John's' Gospel and the three letters of John. However, scholars now think it very unlikely that John the apostle (whom we meet in Matthew, Mark and Luke's gospels) wrote the fourth gospel or the letters, and even less likely that he wrote the Book of Revelation. The most that can be said with any certainty was that the author self-identifies as a man called 'John' who was a Jewish convert to Christianity and had pastoral responsibility for seven churches in Asia Minor.

There is a similar uncertainty about the date it was written, with the traditional date of 95 AD (during the reign of Domitian) giving way to other possibilities such as 71 AD (during the reign of Vespasian). This earlier date puts the writing of Revelation much closer to the tyrannical deeds of Nero (emperor 54–68 AD), who crops up in the book (but not by name) as a personification of the satanic forces of evil.

### **666**

It is likely that Nero is the solution to another of the mysteries in the book, the enigma of the number 666. The Jews used to take names and substitute letters for numbers, and then add these together to arrive at the 'number' of a name. They called this process 'numerology', and believed that you could tell something important about a person by the number of their name.

So when Revelation says that the 'number' of the name of the beast is 666 (13:18), it seems likely that the author has an individual in mind. If you take the Greek for Nero Caesar, transliterate it into Hebrew and turn it into a number you get, you guessed it, 666. 666 is also the number you get from the Greek word for 'beast', reinforcing the point that the number of the 'beast' is indeed the 'name' of Nero.

Another significance of '6-6-6' may well lie in the fact that 7 was the Jewish number of perfection, so if the number of the name of the beast is three consecutive instances of the number 6, the point is made that the beast is forever falling short of perfection. Interestingly, some early manuscripts of Revelation have the number of the beast as 616, which is what you get if you calculate the number of 'Nero Caesar' from Latin rather than Greek. One can imagine John as a first-century equivalent to a modern fan of the cryptic crossword, working meticulously with letters and numbers to demonstrate his belief that Nero is a manifestation of the satanic beast. It seems that for John, Nero had so personally identified himself with the underlying force of evil in the world that he was worthy of distinct identification.

When using this part of Revelation in the contemporary world, we need to be very cautious about identifying any individual as a Nero-like personification of evil, but there may sometimes be those in positions of great power who have so betrayed that trust, and who have authorised works of such terror, that revisiting John's theology of a person being named with the number of the beast may well help us understand that their power is ultimately insignificant compared to the eternal power of Christ. Some have sought to tie in the book of Revelation with the idea of an Antichrist figure who is still to come, but actually 'Antichrist' is not a concept mentioned in Revelation. It comes from the first two letters of John in the New Testament, where it is used to refer to those who wilfully oppose the Lordship of Christ.

## **'Rapture'**

Whilst we're on the subject of things that people sometimes think are in Revelation but which actually aren't, it's time to mention the 'rapture' and the 'tribulation'. This is the idea that at some point in the future, not long before the end of the world, all faithful Christians are suddenly going to be snatched from the earth to heaven, leaving the rest of humanity to face the horror of 'the tribulation'. A number of recent successful Christian novels have popularised this idea, dramatically describing cars left without drivers, aircraft without pilots, and so on. You may know about this if you've seen the recent film 'Left Behind' starring Nicholas Cage.

The idea actually originates in the nineteenth century, and is based on a verse in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 4.17), where Paul is addressing the pastoral issue of why Christians are still dying if Jesus is supposed to have defeated death.

Imagine a king returning to their home city in celebration; the people go out to welcome him and then bring him back to their city. The image in 1 Thessalonians is that those who have gone from the earth, those who have died, in other words, have merely gone on ahead to welcome their returning king (Jesus), who is coming to the earth.

Those who are 'left behind' on the earth in 1 Thessalonians are the faithful Christians who await the coming of their king. However, if this verse is taken out of this original context, it can seem as if it is predicting some future 'rapture', especially if it is combined with the idea of 'tribulation' or punishment for those 'left behind'. The passages in Revelation which are used to support this idea are those which speak of humans suffering on the earth for a limited period of time (3.5 years / 42 months / 1260 days). But actually, the 'tribulation' of Revelation isn't a description of some future punishment to be faced by those who are not Christians. Rather, it is an image for the suffering faced by the faithful church, who are encouraged to 'overcome' through tribulation, and not to give up when the going gets difficult.

## **Millennium**

Another 'hot topic' catch-word which people often associate with Revelation is the 'millennium'. This is one of those words which has acquired something of a life of its own which has taken it far beyond the pages of the book where it started. In contemporary culture, the 'millennium' has come to mean a dawning thousand-year golden age, such as the 'Age of Aquarius' or even the 'Third Reich' of Nazi Germany.

For some Christians, the 'coming millennium' is regarded as the key to understanding the whole book of Revelation, with endless discussions about whether Jesus will return to the earth before (pre-) or after (post-) the millennium. However, within the book of Revelation itself, the 'thousand years' of the millennium has a much more pastoral function. Revelation is written to those who have faced dreadful persecution, and who have heard stories or even personally witnessed Christians being executed for their faith.

From an earthly perspective, the death of a believer through martyrdom appears to be the ultimate victory for the satanic beast of the empire. However, John wants his readers to realize that when viewed from heaven's perspective, martyrdom is not defeat but victory, and so he describes those who have been martyred for their testimony to Jesus as reigning with Christ for a 'thousand years' (20:4). This is an image of great comfort, as it assures those reading it that when seen from above, the martyrdom of the faithful believer is the precise opposite of what it appears when seen from below. An emperor might reign for a decade or two, but Christ reigns, and all the martyrs with him, for a thousand years!

## **'Seven'**

One of the aspects of Revelation which causes confusion sometimes is its rather complex literary structure. It doesn't simply progress as a straightforward narrative from beginning to end. Rather, it twists and turns, cycles back on itself, repeats images and themes, and generally takes a bit of getting your head around. This is a deliberate literary technique, and it

can be very effective, because it hammers home the basic premise of the book again and again, using repetitious imagery, whilst still remaining an interesting and engaging read.

One of the areas of repetition is in the sequences of 'seven' found throughout the book. The number seven had special significance for the Jewish people, reflecting the seven days of creation described at the beginning of Genesis, and was their number of 'perfection'. Within Revelation, we meet the number seven on numerous occasions, from the seven churches to whom the letter is addressed (which are described as seven stars held in the hand of Jesus [1: 11, 16]), to the seven flaming torches which symbolise the Spirit of God (4: 5). We meet the number seven most obviously in the sequences of seven seals, seven trumpets and seven bowls which provide the overall structure for the central part of the book.

Shortly after describing his ascent into heaven, John sees a scroll sealed with seven seals, and Jesus (symbolised by a lion) starts to break the seals open (5: 1, 5). This picture of Jesus as a lion is contrasted with an image of him as a lamb that has been killed (5: 6). The powerful lion is seen to be the same person as the sacrificial lamb. Just as in C.S. Lewis's Narnia stories, where the fearsome lion Aslan is bound and killed, so the mighty lion of Revelation is revealed to be the crucified Jesus. As each of the seven seals on the scroll is broken by the lion, a new sequence of narrative is triggered (chs 6, 7), with the final seal introducing a new sequence of seven, this time seven angels blowing seven trumpets (chs 8-15), and again as each trumpet is blown another narrative sequence begins. The same angels then appear again, this time with seven bowls filled with fiery coals from the altar burning before the throne of God, which they start to pour onto the earth (ch 16). These sequences of seals, trumpets, and bowls are an example of the repetitive nature of Revelation's structure, as the events that occur with their opening, blowing and outpouring are all demonstrations of the idea that God will ultimately bring evil to judgment, and that he is at work rescuing humans from those forces which hold them captive in their minds, souls and bodies. In the background to all this is the image of the exodus of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and so quite a lot of the images in the central section of Revelation echo the plagues of Egypt which led to the people of Israel finding release from their experience of slavery.

## **Suffering**

The question of why it is that good people face suffering and difficulty is one which Revelation grapples with, and has also been a feature of the way the text has been interpreted down the centuries since it was written. Revelation's answer to this question is most explicit in the story of the two witnesses (symbolising the church) who faithfully bear testimony to the Lordship of Jesus and are ultimately killed by those who cannot bear to hear their words (ch 11). The point is clear: as Jesus himself met persecution, so those who bear his name can expect nothing less. However, just as death could not hold Jesus in its grasp, neither will death defeat the church, and so the two witnesses are returned to life (11: 11). The fruit of their faithful testimony is seen to be the fulfilment of the Lord's Prayer 'your kingdom come, on earth as in heaven', as the kingdoms of the earth become the kingdom of God (11: 15).

## **Four horsemen and the whore of Babylon**

One of the great enduring images of Revelation is that of 'the four horsemen of the Apocalypse'. The picture of four great stallions galloping across the sky at the end of time is one that many of us know well. However, as is so often the case with Revelation's wonderful images, the things people have done with them don't always do justice to the images themselves. Rather than being something that will happen at some point in the future, it makes more sense to understand the image of the four horsemen as a picture of the way the world was, is, and will be. In John's world of the first century he saw death, suffering, war, economic injustice, plague and pestilence rampaging through the world and creating nothing less than hell on earth. John's great insight is that these evil forces are set loose in the world whenever humans create and re-create 'empire', whenever humans construct those satanic political / economic / ideological / military institutions ('empires') which take for themselves the power and privilege and devotion that by rights belongs to God alone.

Another of Revelation's powerful images for the 'empire' that displaces God from the centre of the cosmos is that of 'the great whore of Babylon' (we have already discussed the image of 'Babylon' for Rome). We meet her towards the end of the book (ch 17), and she is presented as a pastiche of the goddess Roma. The Romans personified their empire as a female goddess (think of Britannia symbolising the British empire), and statues and paintings of Roma were common. John reworks this image of the empire as a beautiful, virginal, noble, pure woman, and describes her instead as a prostitute, as the 'great whore'.

Instead of the Roman empire being a system of trade which benefits all parties (which is how it presented itself), John paints it as an economic system which corrupts those who buy into its benefits. It is no accident that the great whore rides the great beast, which symbolises the military power and might of the Roman Empire.

It is so often the case that economic corruption and military might go hand in hand, colluding together to take wealth from the earth by both deception and force.

It is a legitimate question to ask where, in our world, can we see the great whore of economic oppression in league with the great beast of military might, seducing and compelling the world into submission.

The hopeful promise of Revelation is that such beasts are not eternal, and that God is at work to bring all that is evil to its ultimate end, and all that is good to its ultimate goal.

## **Renewal of all things**

Revelation ends with a vision of a recreated cosmos, the 'new heavens and new earth' (ch 21). Those who have journeyed their way through the book, who have entered into its vision of heaven and have learned to see the world as heaven sees it, are granted a final vision of the way the world could be, and are invited to have faith that this is the way the world will be.

At the centre of this vision of the renewal of all things lies an image of the church, depicted as a city and called the 'new Jerusalem'. In the first century, the temple in Jerusalem was the place where the Jews believed God lived. It is likely that the temple had been destroyed by the Romans just a few years before Revelation was written, and so John's description of the church as the 'new Jerusalem' sent a powerful signal that God was no longer to be confined to one earthly city, but was now present wherever people gathered in the name of Jesus.

The city of 'new Jerusalem' is offered as an alternative to the city of 'Babylon' (Rome), and the invitation is for those who have seen the evils of Babylon to transfer their citizenship to the 'new Jerusalem'. In today's world of rampant nationalism and divisive tribalism, the challenge to give one's primary allegiance to the heavenly city rather than to any earthly power offers a powerful antidote to the evils of ethnic tension and division. Within the scheme of Revelation, the faithful people of God are central to the salvation of creation.

Those who follow Christ through suffering are those who share in the great resurrection of all things. But more than this, the churches have a crucial part to play in the re-creation of the cosmos, as they faithfully bear witness to the in-breaking kingdom of God in the midst of the present. Those who pray and live out 'your kingdom come, on earth as in heaven', are those who bring the future into being in the here-and-now, and so give shape to the alternative, hopeful future that Revelation proclaims. The good news, or gospel, of Revelation is that evil cannot last forever, and so evil and all its works are seen to be cast into the lake of fire and burned away. Even death and hell are thrown in to the lake of fire, as humanity is at the last freed from the destructive powers of the satanic empire.

**Further reading:**

Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of St John*, edited by Morna Hooker, *Black's New Testament Commentaries* (London: Continuum, 2006).  
Simon Woodman, *The Book of Revelation* (London: SCM, 2008).  
Tom Wright, *Revelation for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2011).

# **The State of Nature 2020 – An update on the current state of the planet and predicted impacts.**

**Andy Lester<sup>1</sup>, Conservation Director for A Rocha UK**

(Transcript of lecture from the Faith & Thought Symposium 2020)

I'm delighted to be with you today for the Faith and Thought Symposium looking at the theme of the State of Nature in 2020 - and hasn't it been an extraordinary last few months? We've seen the rise of a virus that nobody could have predicted coming and the impact has been stark and immediate. You only need to look outside the doors to see the clearer skies, the quieter roads, the loss of pollution and the sounds of birdsong in places where they're often overpowered by traffic. So there have clearly been some advantages to the last few weeks, but I imagine for many of you watching and listening to this presentation, it's been a bittersweet time. Certainly for myself I know of a number of people who have lost their lives, and many others who remain in intensive care, so our thoughts today, as you meet virtually this year, is for you to know our prayers with you all and particularly for those in the NHS and on the frontline for whom this is clearly a really challenging time.

So as far as the state of nature is concerned I want to consider four specific areas.

## **Over arching Ecological and related sociological Trends**

- 1) CLIMATE CHAOS
- 2) BREXIT and WIDER POLITICS
- 3) INTERNET and HEALTH
- 4) BIODIVERSITY LOSS

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<sup>1</sup> Andy is a Chartered Environmentalist, with a background in ecology, economics and the corporate sector. With the assistance of specialist staff, interns and community volunteers, Andy has led conservation work at A Rocha UK's nature reserves Wolf Fields and Foxearth.

The first is climate chaos and interestingly it has a number of parallels with some of the themes of the COVID crisis. Then looking at Brexit and Wider Politics and its impact on the planet. The third issue is Internet and Health and then finally but certainly not least importantly the Loss of Biodiversity and that's the loss of species and habitats.

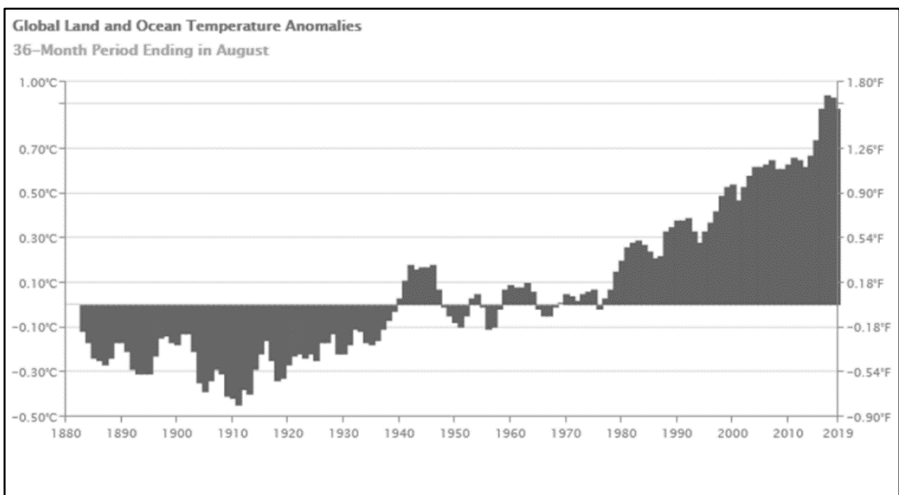
### **Trend 1: Climate Chaos**

- 1) **Global wildlife is changing at the fastest pace in recorded history.** New species are arriving on a monthly basis and upland-loving species are retreating at up to 100km a year.
- 2) **Sudden shocks are rapidly increasing in frequency and intensity-** from flood events, to extreme hurricanes and fires
- 3) **Modelling cannot keep up with the increased change-** <1.5°C is now impossible as is a sea level rise of <1.2m
- 4) **International hostility-** fuelling the fear that we could be too late to avert a catastrophe (India, Australia, USA, Saudi Arabia, Brazil)

So let's start off with looking at the current climate crisis. We know that global wildlife is changing at the fastest pace in recorded history. New species are arriving on a monthly basis and some of you may be familiar with a number of the new species. Take the Little Egret for example, a small white heron that in the UK, until a number of years ago, was very rare, and it's now very widespread. It's a species that has responded to the warming shifts of global temperature, as many species have done, by moving north from Mediterranean zones into more temperate areas. But, of course, the movements of species are not just positive. A number of species are retreating, so, in the UK, we see many species retreating northwards, at a rate of up to a hundred kilometres every couple of years, to try and escape the warmer weather.

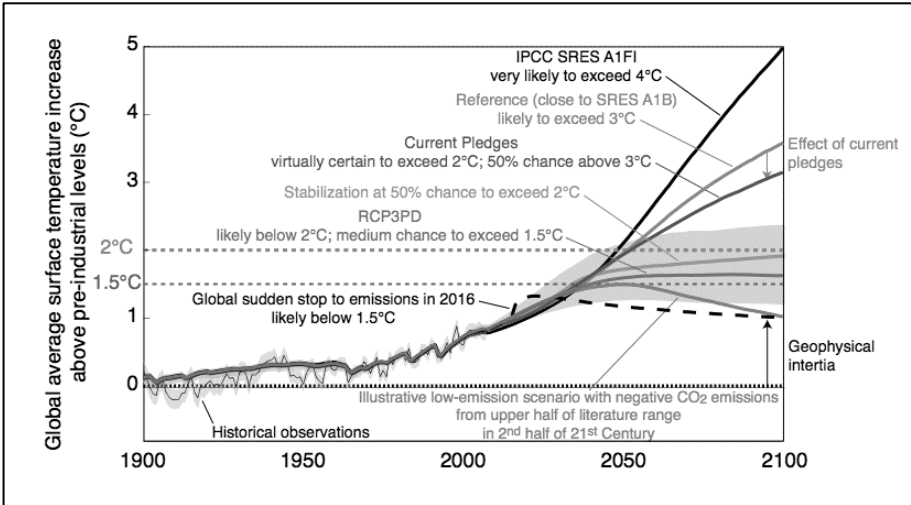
So global wildlife is shifting and 'Sudden Shocks' are rapidly increasing in both their frequency and intensity. Many of you will have been aware of the severe floods earlier this year, but some will have already forgotten about them because, of course, we're getting severe floods far more frequently, and that is indeed impacting people's ability to remember them. So we will see more severe weather events not just in this country but around the world and that'll be more extreme hurricanes, more fires (as we've seen in Australia through the course of the last winter) and far more flooding.

I think the third trend is that modelling simply can't keep up with the increased levels of changes. We've been aiming for a long time as a global community at a 1.5°C rise in temperature and saying we need to keep within that. But it is looking increasingly unlikely that 1.5°C rise in temperature is at all possible. We've also been looking at trying to keep sea-level rise under 1 metre and that too is looking increasingly unlikely. Perhaps one of the biggest trends in recent years has been international hostility to international agreements fuelling the fear that we could be too late to avert a catastrophe. We think in particular of India, Australia, United States, Saudi Arabia and Brazil to name a few; countries where there has been a significant lurch to the right and, as the right-wing governments have taken power, so the desire to protect their own, over their desire to support and encourage international agreements, has become quite prevalent.



This graph shows the climate trends graphically. It's a relatively new graph but it'll be familiar to many of you. The invisible line in the middle shows what the temperature should be, and the blue and the red shows temperature anomalies. The blue shows temperatures below expected and the red above expected, and you can see that from the 1940s onwards and especially the 1970s onwards there's been a rapid global escalation in temperature.

So, there are big changes in temperature and, at the moment, we are looking at potentially a 2°C to maybe a 3°C rise in global sea surface temperature during many of our lifetimes, and that could be catastrophic.



This graph looks confusing, but actually it is relatively simple. I want to draw your attention to the orange line which is called the stabilization line. This is an interesting one because it suggests that we could stabilize global temperature in the long term at a 2.0°C rise in temperature and there's a one in two chance of us being able to do that. Note, though, it's saying stabilization at +2.0°C, not a stabilization at +1.5°C, and that is because if we wanted to reach +1.5°C we would have to have the kind of energy efficiency we have seen over the last three months, as a result of the corona crisis, repeated initially over a four to five-year period, continuously, and then reviewed thereafter.

So the issue is that we are still hell-bent on growth and the current crisis may have slowed growth down for a very short period of time but most governments are equally intent on getting back to business as usual as fast as possible. And business as usual in climate terms means a temperature rise trajectory of at least +2.0°C. But you'll also see, in purple, current pledges virtually certain to exceed +2.0°C, chances above 3. In other words, if we do nothing new (we just continue with business as usual as we are

doing at the moment) then +2.0°C itself is looking unlikely. We are more likely to be on a global temperature trajectory of a 3.0°C rise in temperature. Now the implication difference between +2.0°C and +3.0°C is stark. Quite simply, humankind may not be able to survive in its current form with anything above about a 2.5°C rise in temperature. Vast areas of the planet could be uninhabitable. The implications for food loss, biodiversity loss and many other factors will be acute. So it is critical that we keep it under +2.0°C, but the difference between the Corona virus and the climate crisis, put very simply, is that people look at the Corona crisis and immediately think 'we're going to die, there's a risk of death, there's a risk that a large number of people in our population will cease to exist', therefore there's been this lockdown and a need to take a dramatic action. But even when faced with a crisis of this magnitude we hear the likes of Donald Trump saying the price of economic success is further deaths and it's time to reopen the American economy. And so once again we see this strive to put finance ahead of the welfare of the world population and the wider natural world.

Over the last 10 years we've seen a number of new danger areas emerging around climate.

<p><b>TREND ONE: NEW DANGER AREAS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>1)RAPID MELTING OF PERMAFROST (4)</li><li>2)PATHOGENIC HYBRIDISATION (3-4)</li><li>3)RAPID GLACIAL MELT and SALT WATER DILUTION (5)</li><li>4)EXPLOSIVE CYCLOGENESIS and CYCLONIC RI INCREASES (4)</li><li>5)RAINFOREST DROUGHT CYCLES (3-4)</li></ul> <p>Likelihood: 1 low through to 5 extremely likely by 2050</p>
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Pathogenic Hybridization is where, for example, two viruses that were never meant to meet, meet and create super viruses. Where pathogens, one in a Mediterranean area or in a tropical area and one in a more temperate area finally cross paths because of climate change and produce super-pathogens. The implications for food growing, for plants and for human health could be stark. One of the reasons the pathogens are more likely to

mix than before is because of global warming - pathogens are able to move in some cases as windblown spores and can move over considerable distances. So we are likely to see more virus pandemics, and to see more impacts on plants and on food growing than ever before as climate change kicks in.

Explosive Cyclogenesis is about storm systems. Some of you may be aware of the phrase 'weather bomb', the Daily Mail loves it, but effectively it is where storm systems gather power far faster than ever before and we are now seeing this right around the world. With lowering salinity in our oceans and a rising sea temperature the net result is that weather systems crossing major sea bodies are able to contain more moisture and to pick up greater heat and intensity as they do so. The net result is rapidly increasing very intense and much larger storm systems. There's not necessarily an increase in frequency but there is certainly evidence of an increase in ferocity, particularly in the North Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans.

## **Trend Two : Brexit Crisis and Wider Politics.**

Now I hasten to add that I don't want to get drawn on British politics at this stage. I'm aware that all of you listening will have different views and different perspectives, and that's fine. The nature of politics is, there isn't a right or wrong answer, and I know plenty of people who have a strong faith and are absolute advocates of Brexit and those who have an equally strong faith and are not. But there are challenges in Brexit, as there are global challenges to the current political direction that we're going.

- 1) UK uplands are diversifying too slowly; with a risk of sudden shocks- unclear replacement to subsidy led farming and divisions between conservation and farming sectors
- 2) Potentially productive land is being built on at an increasing rate- risk of reducing available land for farming and conservation-resilience
- 3) Global trade could be reduced to bi-lateral deals that put business before the planet- nations find themselves forced to purchase specific products and services
- 4) Achieving global deals on environment, security and trade is looking less likely than ever- are we entering a post-globalist era at a time where intra-national agreement is more essential than ever?
- 5) Increased risk of entire population displacement endangering global growth
- 6) Still no adequate alternative measures of economic growth and devt

The first is Upland Diversification. Our upland areas are diversifying far too slowly and our current upland systems are subsidy-led. So, if you are an upland sheep farmer, over 80% of the money that you currently get comes through government subsidy, not through production. So there is a desperate need to find alternatives for our upland areas. With Brexit, the subsidies are likely to dry up, as the government does not have new money for farming. Some of the new farming subsidies are going to be very much around environmental payments, which is great news. But for many farmers on the margins, and upland sheep farming would be one of those, the future is extremely uncertain, and we need to look at re-envisioning what the landscape of upland Britain will look like in the next 20 years. It's going to be very different to the one that we see today.

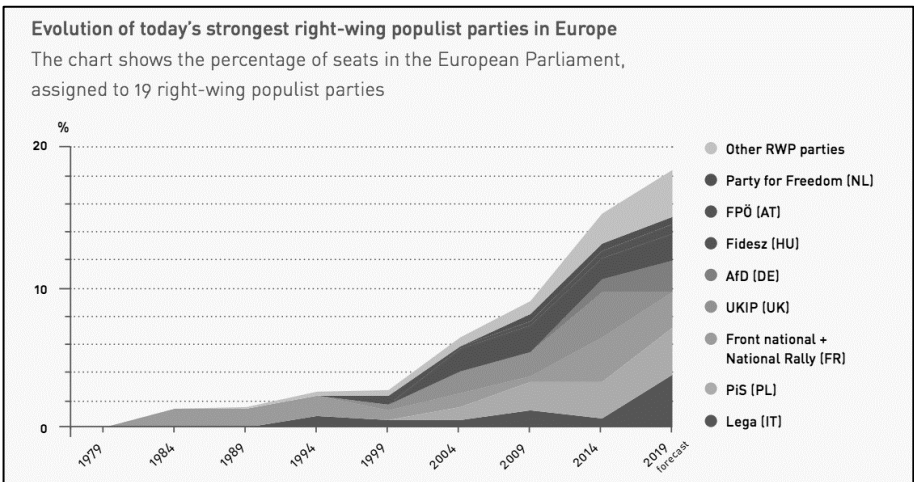
Farming as a whole is not very lucrative and as a result over the last 20 years we've seen increasing areas of really high-quality farmland transformed for property: sold to major property developers and then the farmers can take early retirement. You can understand their motivation. It's much better for them to get £2million, £3million, £4million or £10 million for their land and allow it to be built on, than keep farming and recognize that the amount of money you're going to make year-on-year will barely keep food on the table. So, as a whole, we need to rethink our farming systems and this is not just in the UK, but it's in every developed nation where the farm-gate price is too low and where supermarkets are often giving back to the farmer at a very unfair price.

The third is around Global Trade. The multilateral deals that marked the 1980s and early 90s have been replaced by a move to far more bilateral trade agreements, where trade wars are back on the table, and where countries are fighting for resources without recourse to international bodies such as the United Nations. Nations will increasingly find themselves forced to buy particular products from the wealthier nations for example the United States and China. That has huge environmental implications for us as we go forwards. So as international agreements break down, the impacts on the environment, on security and on trade are marked. There is a question as to whether we are now entering a post-globalist era.

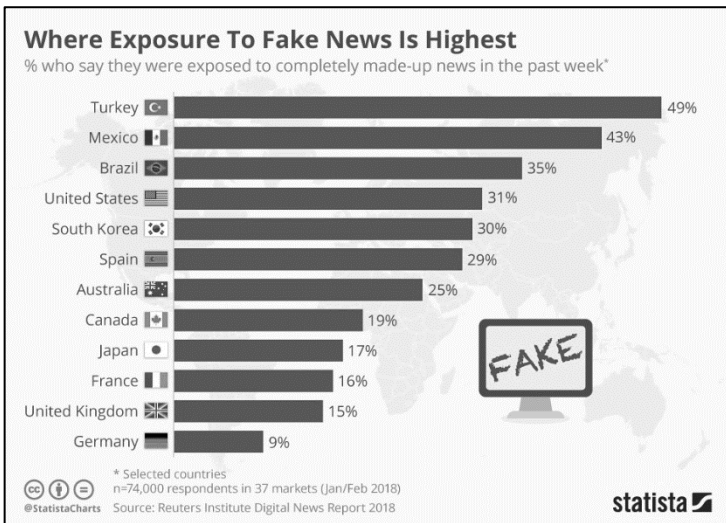
The surge of nationalism both on the right and on the left could spur a big move towards isolationism and that is something that will have a very profound effect on the ability to create environmental agreements.

There's also the increased risk of entire population displacements - climate change kicks in as temperatures rise and as things begin to shift so large population groups will be forced to move from formerly productive farmland or former cities where water supply runs short.

In all of this we seem to continue to measure success by gross domestic product, and there are no alternatives out there that are really viable or accepted by the economic community. But we need to find them, because gross domestic product is a failed measure of success. It says for example that if there's a hurricane and then you spend millions or billions of US dollars rebuilding a nation or a country or a region, those rebuilding costs go into gross domestic product tables as a benefit, as a positive cost element. Of course it's not, it's an environmental bad, it's the world responding to a crisis so we need to look for new measures of environmental and economic growth.



This little graph just shows the rise in Europe of the far-right, and it has been a very significant rise. If you were to take a longer view of it then, pre-Second World War, there was a similar rise in parties from the far-right, so this is effectively repeating something that has gone before. It will tail off, but for now it is a very real and present danger and whatever your political persuasion, we are called as children of God to be globalist; to think of our neighbour, to care for the other, to focus on the unloved and the unwanted, to wash the feet of those who have dirty feet, not those who are clean, of associating with those who are different not those who are similar. So we need to be highly aware of the threat of the rise of nationalist politics and the implication that will have on the ability to deliver international environment programs going forwards.



Here's another trend graph on Brexit and wider politics and that's our exposure to Fake News. We only have to look at the Corona crisis of the last few months to realize that a large amount of the news that's pumped out by social media shouldn't be believed or should be properly researched. One of the stories that broke a few weeks ago was the return of dolphins to the canals of Venice in Italy. This wasn't a true story; the pictures of the dolphins in the video that the BBC was using weren't even the right species of dolphin for the region. So we have to fact-check all the way through when it comes to environment and aid development figures.

As a scientist, it is critical that what I say is as factually accurate as possible. I would be lying to you if I said, 'Let's not worry, we're only going to be seeing a temperature rise of a little bit under 1.5°C'. I've read the facts and it is really important that we are honest with people about the truth. And honesty means not exaggerating, either. I read a report that said we're looking at a 5.0°C rise in temperature. We're not, right now, so there's no point in saying it. The big problem with fake news, when it comes to science, is that there is a temptation among scientists trying to get a point across to say more than they should, or in some cases, where there's vested interests with government, to say less than they should, and both are fake news, both are wrong, and both should be totally discouraged.

The new danger areas over the last few years for the UK:

**TREND TWO: NEW DANGER AREAS**

- 1) COMPLETE LOSS OF UPLAND FARMING SYSTEMS WITH NO VIABLE ALTERNATIVE (3)**
- 2) DEEPENING DISCONNECT BETWEEN CONSERVATION AND FARMING SECTORS (2-3)**
- 3) RAPID SUBURBANISATION OF HIGHLY PRODUCTIVE FARM LAND (3)**
- 4) INABILITY TO PRODUCE ENOUGH FOOD SUSTAINABLY AT A TIME OF GROWING INSECURITY (3-4)**
- 5) NEW TRADE AGREEMENTS DAMAGE EXISTING DOMESTIC MARKET (4)**

Complete loss of upland farming systems with no viable alternative, as subsidies dry up. Alternatives need to be found to fill that gap.

Deepening disconnect in many places between the conservation and farming sectors. The two are still sniping at each other, particularly on things like grouse hunting and plans for the uplands, but also on intensive versus organic agriculture. In many cases solutions can be found but they will be found through dialogue not through argument.

We're losing a lot of our highly productive farmland not just here in Britain but across the United States, in Canada and also across much of Europe and South America.

Can we genuinely build a truly food sustainable future in the UK when we are still importing so much, and so much of it comes from unstable countries and countries that are being ravaged already by climate change? We need to rethink our farming systems and bring back in food-calendars, so that we're not demanding strawberries 365 days a year, but only in the primary breeding/growing seasons.

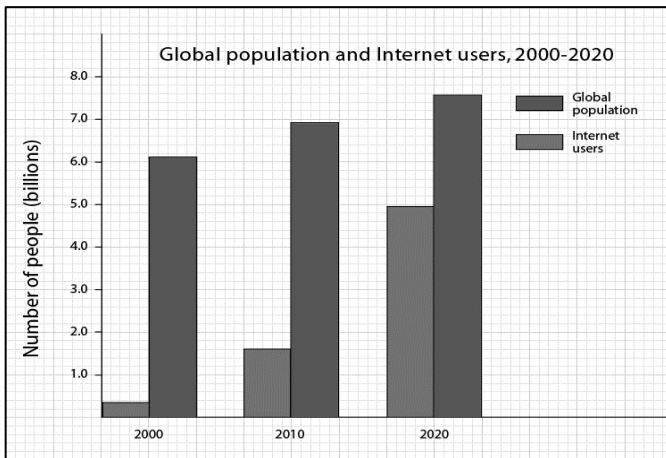
With the loss of multilateral trade agreements, new trade agreements are becoming bilateral, so there's a huge risk of damage to the domestic marketplace. I'm only going to mention one for the sake of time: the chlorinated chicken story from the United States. If we begin to import products that have much lower environmental protection around them, we risk not only animal welfare but also human health.

### **Trend Three: Internet Disconnection**

- 1) GLOBAL CONNECTION IS EXCEEDING 90% IN MANY COUNTRIES. ENVIRONMENTAL STORIES ARE INSTANTLY RELAYED**
- 2) 5-15 YEAR OLDS ARE SPENDING AT LEAST 15 HOURS A WEEK SOCIALLY ON LINE IN EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA**
- 3) ONLY 1 in 10 CHILDREN ENGAGE WEEKLY WITH NATURE IN 2019; IT WAS 4 IN 10 IN 1980-THE INTERNET IS SEEN AS THE MAIN FACTOR IN MOST SURVEYS**
- 4) THE MAIN PLACE FOR ENGAGEMENT WITH NATURE ARE CITY PARKS-WITH 879 MILLION VISITS IN 2016**

Let me just start by saying the Internet is a really good thing. I love the Internet, I use it frequently. I'm using it right now to broadcast to you. Social media has come into its own during the crisis of the last few months. So don't get me wrong, I'm not anti-technology, it's a big part of what I do in my work. Global connection to the Internet is now exceeding 90% in most countries and we see many environmental stories that are instantly relayed around the world. In some cases, as we noted with Fake News, some of that's really good and some of that is less good. Five to fifteen year-olds are spending at least 15 hours a week socially on their computers in the developed world. Over the corona crisis I think we're going to see that, too, increasing dramatically.

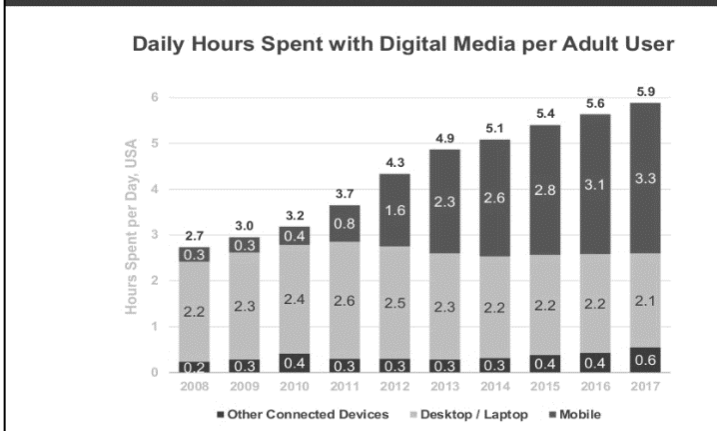
In 2019 only one in ten children engaged weekly in nature: that's for an hour or more in the UK. That was four in ten back in the 1980s and the Internet has been described as the main driver of bringing people inside. On a sunny day, like today, the average age group that's out and about in our local area would be 50-plus. Yet people still enjoy nature and the main place for engagement in nature appears to be city parks with 879 million visits in 2016 alone and that trend is going upwards.



This graph is a good illustrator of the shift in internet connection or disconnection. In 2020, five of the 7.7 billion people on the planet are now connected permanently to the Internet, by 2030 that's likely to be around 90%. So if the global population is about 8.2 billion at that point, then 7 plus billion people will be connected to the Internet. We are rapidly becoming a globally connected society.

Here's a graph that shows digital media use and it is really fascinating to look at mobile use particularly from adult users (this is in the UK) showing a 4% annual growth in many cases. You'll see a figure of 3.3 hours in the last survey for adult users of phone use during the day time. I guess this conversation I'm having with you which is being relayed through a phone online may well count as some of my time today!

**Digital Media Usage @ +4% Growth...  
5.9 Hours per Day (Not Deduped)**



Some of the rapid changes though are concerning.

**TREND THREE : NEW DANGER AREAS**

- 1) **RAPID GROWTH IN DEPRESSION AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE. UK 950,000 WITH A MENTAL HEALTH ISSUE-INCREASING EVIDENCE OF LINK TO NATURE DEFICIT DISORDER (3)**
- 2) **EMPTY COUNTRYSIDE FOR THE 16-30 AGE COHORT (4)**
- 3) **RISE OF FAKE NEWS MEDIA ON ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE USING INTERNET AS MAIN DELIVERY VEHICLE (5)**
- 4) **LACK OF CREATIVITY AMONGST THE CONSERVATION ORGANISATIONS TO REACH NEW PEOPLE (3-4)**
- 5) **4.1 MILLION TYPE 2 DIABETES SUFFERERS, 1 IN 5 OBESE, CORONA CRISIS (4)**

The first is a rapid growth in depression amongst young people in Britain, just under a million with a mental health issue recorded in 2018, and increasing evidence of a disconnect to nature, now given the medical phrase Nature Deficit Disorder - a disconnection of people from nature and reality as people are spending more and more time inside. Recent surveys in Germany showed that the medical recovery rate of young people was higher when they could either see outside to greenery, parks, mountains, lakes and so on than looking straight out at a brick wall or having nothing to look at. So Nature Deficit Disorder is a real condition. Our separation

from nature and our separation from God in nature is critical to human health. We've seen that too with corona as people who have been able to get outside have perhaps been in a stronger mental state than those who've had to remain formally locked down inside a house which is incredibly tough.

There's also an empty countryside for the 16-30 Age Cohort. Those in this age group are not out enjoying nature in anywhere near the numbers they used to be. Our teenagers are staying inside and it's only the younger folk under the age of sixteen who are still being dragged out by parents for their weekly walk who are encountering nature. That's a big generalization, there are plenty of people who are enjoying nature, but if you were to plot a graph of age profiles you would find that it is the elderly and retired couples particularly who are enjoying nature to a much higher degree than those of working ages.

We've talked about the rise of Fake News on environment and climate using internet as main delivery vehicle.

Lack of creativity amongst the conservation organisations to reach new people. I work for an environmental charity, A Rocha UK, as their head of conservation and one of the things that I'm particularly keen on is pushing the conservation sector to become more imaginative. We tend to hide in meetings and forums or between newspaper headlines. We hide with the familiar, whereas now is the time to take risks and do things differently. So let's use our creative juices and let's try and find solutions that will draw people back out into nature and out into the countryside in a way that hasn't happened in a generation.

We need it for medical reasons as well; we have 4.1 million type 2 diabetes sufferers in the UK, one in five people are considered obese, one in three are overweight. And then we have the Corona crisis which is another reason why we need to rethink our relationship with nature. If the scientists are accurate, and I believe they probably are, then the novel Corona virus started in a 'wet market', in a wild bat species that was being traded. The problem with taking a wild species is they will have pathogens that are never meant to cross the human-nature boundary. If you handle a wild

creature, and particularly if you eat it, and it's not intended to be eaten, then the risks to human health are significant, as pathogens in the human body meet pathogens in a wild animal and can create something pretty horrific. At the moment the jury's out. Some of you may be unconvinced that this wasn't man-made and didn't come out of a lab. Time will tell, but if I was wagering money on it, I would say this almost certainly had a natural source, meaning something that we have done to nature, and in doing it to nature we have exposed ourselves to a new threat, and it won't be the last one. It won't be the last time that happens.

Richard Louv 'Last Child in the Woods' (2005) says 'Nature Deficit Disorder describes the human cost of alienation from nature. Among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties and high rates of emotional and physical illness.' Professor David Orr from Oberlin College says 'we have little idea of the effects of excessive materialism among children and our young people but it's reasonable to assume it includes the loss of deeper feelings and loss of identity rooted in self, in relationships and in place'

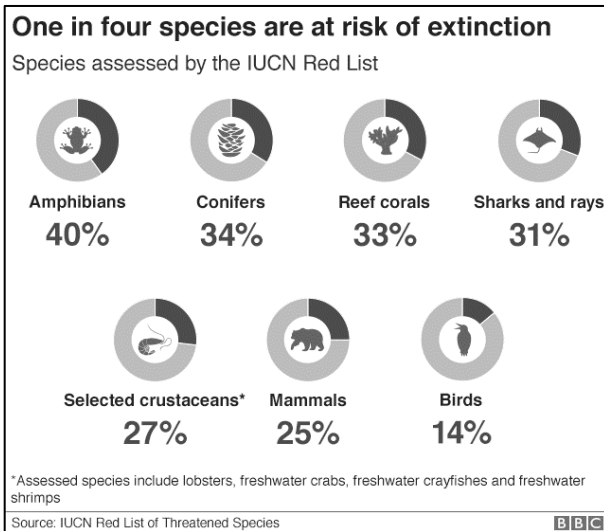
#### **Trend Four: Biodiversity Loss**

<b>TREND FOUR: BIODIVERSITY LOSS</b>	
1) DECLINES IN SPECIES ARE ACCELERATING RATHER THAN SLOWING. CURRENT RECENT UPDATE (abundance) DECLINES TAKING 1970 AS A BASE LINE:	
<b>41% of all insects</b> <b>57% butterflies</b>	<b>50% of birds</b> <b>97% of wildflowers</b>
2) GLOBAL DECLINES ARE EVEN MORE SIGNIFICANT; WITH AN ESTIMATED EXTINCTION RATE OF 200 SPECIES OF PLANT, INSECT, BIRD AND MAMMAL IN 2019 EVERY 24 HOURS (UN/CBD data)	
3) GLOBAL EXTINCTION IS NOW RUNNING AT 1,000 TIMES THE EXPECTED RATE. HIGHEST LEVEL IN 65 MILLION YEARS	

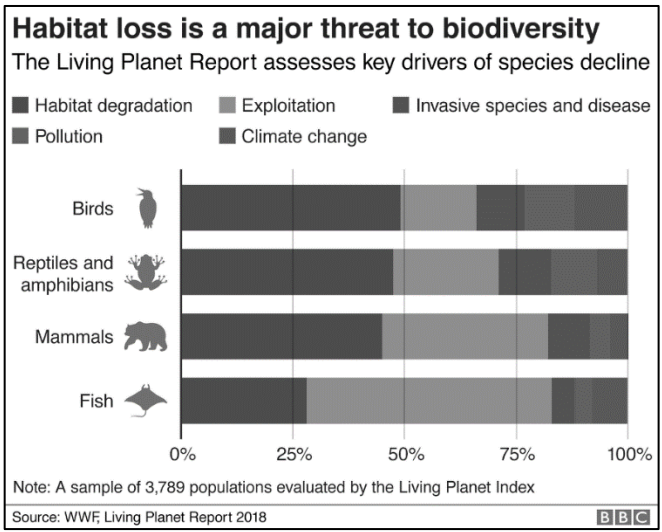
We're seeing major declines in species and those declines are accelerating rather than slowing. Current recent update with 1970s as a baseline shows that 41% of insects, 57 percent of butterflies, half of our birds and 90 percent of

our wild flowers have disappeared. To put that into context half of our birds in terms of abundance is 40 million birds vanishing from our countryside and that trend has continued not just in the UK but in China, in Japan, right across Europe, right across North America and now more worryingly in areas where there are traditional rainforests where species loss is huge as big swathes of rainforests are converted for short-term farming and mining.

Global declines are really significant with an estimated extinction rate from the IUCN on the United Nations of about 200 species in every 24 hours, and that is growing, not diminishing. We are losing at least 200 species every day; some news outlets put that figure much higher, but that's not provable. We can prove that 200 species are going, but it may be more. Either way, that would mean that the global extinction rate around the planet is running at a thousand times higher than the expected rate from natural trends. That's the highest level of extinction in 65 million years. Not since the demise of the dinosaurs have we seen the level of extinction that we're currently seeing and that is only likely to increase rather than diminish. That is sobering; in our lifetimes we will continue to see the loss of very large numbers of species.



This rather sobering graph shows the decline of different species groups around the world with a 40% extinction expected over the next 30 years of amphibians, 30% of sharks and rays expects to be extinct in our lifetimes, a quarter of mammals and 14% of birds. These are really high projected extinction rates of the short to medium term so you could expect to see these figures as early as 2050.



This graph is also unusual and it shows the loss of habitat, human exploitation during the 20th century being the main driver. You'll notice that climate change (in blue, right) is a very small driver on this graph and that's because it's taking a period from 1960s through to the present day. But if you look at this graph again in ten years the blue would be penetrating the others in a way that we're not seeing there. Climate change will become, in the next ten years probably, the single main driver of biodiversity loss. At the moment it's habitat loss and exploitation; they're not going to go away, but it just means that climate change will become a bigger driver still.

As climate is shifting we're seeing the rise of invasive species at an unprecedented and unparalleled rate. Many of you will be familiar with Ash Dieback disease; we are losing our ash trees in the UK and that's because the pathogen that is causing it was introduced via garden centres. Garden centres introduce not only new pathogens, but they are guilty of bringing in new plants, which then find their way into the wild and then can breed and cause huge problems. Japanese knotweed and Himalayan Balsam are good examples, but even in the bird world some of our birds, such as parakeet, are invasives, and they are now responding well to these shifts in climate. Controlling invasive species, and watching their impact on native wildlife, is a very costly exercise and that goes from species like grey squirrel through to American Mink; species in the UK that have penetrated right across the country and are causing untold damage to our woodlands and also to native species like the red squirrel.

As we finish this section I just want to read something from a paper written last year from the National Centre for climate restoration in Australia. It is sobering but before we come on to the next section which is less sobering I wanted to finish on a note which gives you an idea of what we're up against.

*BIO LOSS +3/2050 'Most regions in the world see a significant drop in food production and increasing numbers of extreme weather events, including heatwaves, floods and storms.*

*Food production is inadequate to feed the global population and food prices sky rocket, as a consequence of a one-fifth decline in crop yields, a decline in the nutrition content of food crops, a catastrophic decline in insect populations, desertification, monsoon failure and chronic water shortages, and conditions too hot for human habitation in significant food-growing regions.*

*The lower reaches of the agriculturally-important river deltas such as the Mekong, Ganges and Nile are inundated, and significant sectors of some of the world's most populous cities—including Chennai, Mumbai, Jakarta, Guangzhou, Tianjin, Hong Kong, Ho Chi Minh City, Shanghai, Lagos, Bangkok and Manila—are abandoned.*

*Some small islands become uninhabitable. Even for 2°C of warming, more than a billion people may need to be relocated and in high end scenarios, the scale of destruction is beyond our capacity to model.....<sup>2</sup>*

That is the sobering future which we are facing and the implications for us as a faith community are significant and immediate and real.

TREND FOUR: NEW DANGER AREAS

- 1) CHANGE IS OUTSTRIPPING OUR ABILITY TO MITIGATE
- 2) CHANGE IS OUTSTRIPPING THE ABILITY OF ECOSYSTEMS TO ADAPT
- 3) ENTIRE SYSTEM COLLAPSE IS BECOMING MORE LIKELY WITHIN OUR LIFE TIMES
- 4) THE IMPACT OF A SYSTEM LEVEL COLLAPSE COULD INCLUDE MASSIVE LOSS OF HUMAN LIFE AND MASSIVE DISPLACEMENT OF POPULATIONS
- 5) CURRENT MODELS CANNOT COMPUTE IMPACTS OF HIGH END SCENARIO CHANGE ACCURATELY
- 6) WE FACE A POSSIBLE ELE BEFORE 2080

Change is outstripping our ability at the moment to mitigate. It's outstripping the ability of ecosystems to adapt. Entire system collapse from coral reefs through to rainforests are likely in our lifetimes. Extreme system level collapse will have huge impacts on food and water. Current modelling is really struggling to compute what the impact will be on humankind. The reality is we face an 'extinction-level-event' potentially before 2080 where a large population will crash. That's a sobering thought, but it's still avoidable and the main purpose of this talk is both to give a fresh understanding of the level of crisis we are facing but now it's also to turn our attention to the fact that it really is not too late.

**Call to Action – It is not too late.**

Let me start by just saying I still have hope. I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you without believing that hope is real. I think there are five things that we can do:

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<sup>2</sup> Source: Existential climate related security risk. A scenarios approach, May 2019 Breakthrough-National Centre for Climate Restoration, Australia.

1 - PRAYER - We can be a prayerful people. Prayer moves mountains; all through Scripture we see prayer as having, and yielding, tremendous results. My grandmother spent the last two years of her life doing little more than pray, and I believe her prayers changed things. So if we find ourselves in a place where we feel absolutely unable to do anything else, then one of the things that we can undoubtedly do, collectively and individually, is pray for change, pray for governments, pray for continents, pray for climate, pray for species and pray believing that change is indeed possible.

2 - PRACTICAL ACTION – Prayer without action is dead, so just sitting there and praying won't cut it. Prayer is vital and for some of you who may find themselves in a position where that is all you can do that may be enough. But for those who can, getting out there and doing things is critically important. That means everything in your church from growing food for the local community, through to solar panels on the roof, through to new insulation, through to electric car charging points, through to creating new wildlife ponds and putting up House Martin boxes and putting up Peregrine platforms, to writing as a church to your local MP and encouraging the community to disinvest from fossil fuels and disinvesting yourselves from fossil fuels in the shares that you might have in companies. There are all sorts of things that we can do practically to make little and local changes, but if we all do them, then those little and local changes will really add up and make a meaningful and sizeable difference.

3 - PETITION - I guess it's a form a practical action (isn't it?) but this is about writing letters to national government and demanding nationwide and global change on some of the key issues. Now is the time to be writing to our government and demanding a strong response to the next round of climate change talks which have been put back to 2021 in Glasgow. It's absolutely critical we get a pivotal result that will change the world, not just more (excuse the pun) 'hot air' which has been a mark of previous conferences. Let's really dig deep and write meaningful and creative letters demanding change and encouraging governments to recognize the implications of what will happen if we don't change and don't change fast.

4 - PERSISTENCE - If our first letter doesn't get answered we write another one; if that letter doesn't get answered we take our church and we go and stand outside the Department of Trade or we stand outside the Treasury and we demand change. It is our democratic right to peacefully protest. I am NOT for violent uprisings and I'm not for blocking emergency vehicles and I'm not for spray-painting on walls of buildings and causing anger and that sort of cost, but I am in favour, as the Bible is clearly in favour, of standing up for Christ and overturning those tables and proclaiming that things have got to be different. So our voices need to be heard and that means being persistent in prayer, persistent in practical action, persistent in petition and persistent in our protests.

5 - PRAISE - Perhaps most important of all is to remember that we need to praise. We have to continue to love and serve and worship God through this time. We see the cuckoos, we see swifts, we see the daffodils, the tulips and the roses, we see the green grass and the blue oceans. Yes, there may be problems with them all, but let's not stop praising God for the bounty of his creation, for the food on our plates, in many cases for our relative health, for the sunshine and the blue skies.

It's important not to forget that despite the damage we are causing, Christ remains the author and perfecter of our planet - broken as it is. For Him we still need to give praise. I think it is possible, if we did all those things; it is possible for real change.

Habakkuk 1:5 says 'Look at the nation's and watch and be utterly amazed for I'm going to do something in your days that you would not believe even if you were told'.

It's over to you...

Question 1: How can we transform our own communities to better reflect kingdom values on ecology, biodiversity and sustainable living?

Question 2: What are we being called to do for the planet as individuals passionate for change?

Question 3: How does my faith make a difference?

Question 4: What does hope look like in 2020?

## Interview with Thomas Jay Oord

### Prof. Thomas Jay Oord and Dr Alan Kerry

**Alan** - I'm delighted to be joined today by Professor Thomas J Oord, a multidisciplinary scholar, theologian and philosopher. He's written widely and contributed to research on love, open and relational theology, science and religion, and the implications of freedom and relationships for transformation. His 2015 book 'The Uncontrolling Love of God' introduced his concept of 'Essential Kenosis' as a way of understanding that God always loves and never controls. Last year he published 'God Can't' which was aimed at the more general reader and especially for those who have personally suffered the effects of tragedy, abuse and other evils. Both books are highly recommended. Welcome Tom!

**Tom** - It's good to be chatting with you.

**Alan** - When we planned this symposium back in 2018 with the topic of 'A Christian Response to Catastrophe', we thought we were anticipating a series of speculative papers addressing different kinds of possible future catastrophe. But events have rather overtaken us as the novel coronavirus pandemic of COVID-19 has wreaked havoc with individuals, communities and economies around the globe. As we record this, John Hopkins University is reporting nearly two million confirmed cases worldwide and over 120,000 deaths. In the face of this current catastrophe, and I don't think that's too strong a word for it, what use are Christian 'explanations'?

**Tom** - Well I think Christians do need to respond and try to give some kind of an account of the 'hope that lies within them' to quote the Apostle Peter. But the accounts that I typically hear on social media or various other means, I at least don't find particularly satisfying.

**Alan** - Could you say why you don't think those traditional - shall we say Theodicies? - ways of dealing with the problem of evil, why don't you think they work?

**Tom** - Well almost in every case they end up assuming God has the kind of power to prevent the evil, but for some reason doesn't do so. Maybe the reason given is that God is punishing people. Maybe God is allowing evil to help us become better people, to learn something new, to build our character, the whole 'soul-making' theodicy that many people know. There's a variety of reasons. Some people today like the warfare analogy, that God is in this battle with the demons and Satan and God is allowing Satan to run amok for a while, and therefore the coronavirus is Satan's doing. None of these, to me, provide a really strong solution to the problem of evil. And I'm so bold as to suggest that we can actually have a solution to the question of why a good and powerful God doesn't prevent the genuine evils of the world.

**Alan** - OK we'll come to that in a moment. Do you think there's any substantial difference in degree or whatever, between personal catastrophe and the sort of global catastrophe that we're witnessing?

**Tom** - Well I think obviously if we're personally experiencing suffering it feels different than if we're seeing other people experience it. I mean I would like to think we can empathize with victims of evil but it's always a little bit different when we ourselves are enduring that pain personally. But in terms of the question of why a loving and powerful God doesn't prevent the genuine evil, I think the question is the same whether it's personal or global.

**Alan** - For some of the people I've had conversations with, they're not going around asking big deep questions all the time, but it almost feels as though the coronavirus pandemic is inviting bigger questions. Might you in any way see that as a good thing?

**Tom** - I think it is a good thing. Sometimes it takes a tragedy for us to step back and try to analyze the sort of day-to-day happenings that we have and ask the bigger questions of life. Now I'm not a person who thinks that God is allowing the coronavirus just to get people to start asking big

questions, but I do think that God can use the coronavirus and we can come to our senses in some sense and step back and say, 'Why is the world the way it is, if we believe there is a God?'

**Alan** – Yeah, and I think sometimes, in my work as a clinician, I used to find that that's not always the time to talk to people about big answers and big solutions, when people are in the midst of personal suffering, would you agree with that?

**Tom** - I would yes. I think especially when people are enduring pain in the moment one of the most important ways we can show love is to listen and empathize. But I also find that some people never get around to trying to propose a real solution to the question and so I think we need both. It's just the question of timing.

**Alan** - So your later book was called 'God Can't' and sought to provide this coherent rational answer. Go on then, what 'can't' God do and why not?

**Tom** - Well, I join with most theologians in saying that God can't do what is illogical. God can't make a round square, things like that. And then I join other theologians, people like John Wesley, Thomas Aquinas in saying that God can't 'contradict himself' to use the Pauline language. That is, there are certain things about God's nature or essence that God simply can't go against. For instance most theologians have said that God exists necessarily and God can't say 'you know it's been a good run but I'm gonna disappear on Friday'. No, God is going to exist necessarily because that's who God is and God can't make that kind of a decision. So I'm building upon that kind of idea and then saying this: it's God's very nature to love and God's love is self-giving, others-empowering and since God must love because it's God's nature, God simply cannot control anyone or anything because God loves everyone and everything.

**Alan** - The issue of non-control is very central to this and in your book you say 'God always loves and never controls'. Some might say 'but parents

control their children, society controls criminals'. And when I was practicing as a primary care doctor the example that came to my mind was of a patient with, say, bipolar disorder who was having a severe episode of either mania or depression that was impairing their capacity. I would say the illness had impaired their capacity and therefore the right, indeed the loving thing to do, would be to take away their independence and to admit them to hospital for assessment and treatment. That's quite a high level of control but I don't see that as being against the idea of love - but for God that would be?

**Tom** - Yes, great question. I think we're using this word 'control' in a very general sense and maybe I'll try to be a little more specific what I mean by it. Some people want to say that God can't do things by nature and the proposal that I have on the table is that God does this by nature: God can't control by nature. And you bring up the issue of whether or not parents can control children or society can control criminals and that sort of thing. Here I think we need to make a distinction between control as being the only cause (a 'sufficient cause' to use the language of philosophy) and control meaning to have some kind of influence that involves bodily influence.

So let's say there's a parent who sees their three-year-old start to walk to the edge of a pool to fall into the pool and you know they might drown. The parent walks over and takes the three-year-old's arm and pulls the body away and the kid doesn't go into the pool. That, I think, is a loving act and the three-year-old apparently has some kind of freedom, who knows what it is, exactly, but the three-year-old was using that freedom to go toward the pool and the parent rescued that three-year-old. God can't do that, according to my view, not because God can't control in the sense of being a sufficient cause, (I don't think God can do that), but also God doesn't have a localized physical body like you and I do. Most in the Christian tradition have said that God is essentially incorporeal, that means body-less.

Our Mormon ('Latter-Day Saints') brothers and sisters think God has an actual body, but most Christians have said God is a universal spirit without a localized body. Now God can be especially incarnate in Jesus, but that's different than God essentially having a localized body. So that helps to overcome this legitimate concern that you raised on how it's loving sometimes for us to use our bodies to stop evil but God can't do that with a divine body.

**Alan** - Uh-huh. Would you say a little more about this concept of 'Essential Kenosis' then. It's essential in the sense that it's who God is, it's his primary nature. It almost feels in your book as if that primary nature of love 'trumps' His sovereignty, would I be reading that the wrong way?

**Tom** - Yes I think that's pretty close. Maybe a way to describe my view in comparison with some other views that your listeners might know is to compare it with what I'll call 'voluntary divine self-limitation'. This is a view you might get in someone like Jurgen Moltmann, and in some versions of Process Theology, in which God seems to be constrained by metaphysical laws or laws of nature or something that's external to God. So the problem with the 'voluntary divine self-limitation' that you find in Moltmann and, one of my favourites, John Polkinghorne, is that they say God deliberately chooses not to control others, as if God has the capacity to do so and at least usually doesn't use that capacity. Of course the problem there is that, well if God uses it sometimes, why doesn't God use it a lot more often.

On the other side of my view, the external constraints, this sounds like God is sort of fighting against these forces outside of God - 'Oh I'd really like to do more but these things outside of me are stopping me from helping out'. My view says it's God's very nature to be uncontrolling. It says that uncontrolling love comes logically first amongst the divine attributes which is another way of saying, love comes before sovereign choice. So God can't choose not to love, God can't choose not to control because it's God's very nature first and foremost to be uncontrolling.

**Alan** - I think I mentioned when we were prepping this that Moltmann is pretty popular around here, so I think that's really helpful because it takes us a little bit further than the Moltmann view, than simply saying that God identifies with us in our suffering. It's a little more than that. I just want to come back to this idea of Process Theology. Specifically I think that you are an 'Open Theist' in common with another of our Faith & Thought contributors, Keith Ward; you believe that future possibilities remain open, not just for us, but also for God. Does this mean that God has no fore-knowledge at all?

**Tom** - I think God knows everything that's possible to occur in the future, and God might also have plans for God's own activity in the future, but God can't know with absolute certainty everything that's going to happen in the future because the future hasn't yet occurred. So people like Keith and I both think that God knows everything knowable for God to know. God knows everything that happened in the past, everything that's happening in the present and all the possibilities for the future. God may even have plans for the future, but God can't know the future with absolute certainty, because the future isn't yet knowable. There's nothing that can be known, except that there are possibilities.

**Alan** - But many have taken comfort in the eschatological idea that 'it will be all right in The End'. How can we speak of the 'renewal of all things' (Matthew 19:28 and Revelation 21) if even God doesn't know the future?

**Tom** - I think we can talk about the renewal or reconciliation of all things in a way that says that God's uncontrolling love never gives up on anyone or anything. I call this view a 'relentless love eschatology' and it says that God actually requires our participation in order for love to win. So whether you're an open theist like me or not an open theist, I think the big question is, 'can God single-handedly make sure everything gets redeemed, it all works out?' My view is that No, God can't do that single-handedly, but God always calls for our cooperation, and because God never gives up, and God is everlasting, we have genuine hope for the reconciliation of all things.

**Alan** - Thank you. Another theme that you come back to quite regularly is that you're not keen on people pulling the 'mystery card' and saying 'it's all too mysterious for me to understand'. Psalm 31 speaks of 'things too hard for me to understand', but you're not keen on that. I wanted to quote a Bruce Cockburn song from 2006 where he sings 'you can't tell me there is no mystery'. And my wife would say that people who reject any sense of mystery might be suffering from 'toxic certainty'. What would you say to that?

**Tom** - I like Bruce Cockburn; I agree with your wife! Yes, I think there's always going to be mystery involved in any kind of proposal. I do not want to claim that I've got God all figured out, and even the ideas I think are most plausible, I don't know them with absolute certainty. But what I object to is when we start wrestling with these difficult questions, including the problem of evil, and people have their particular ideas of God in place and when you begin to show them that those ideas don't really make a lot of sense, instead of considering the possibility that they need to change some of their ideas, they'll reach into their back pocket and pull out this mystery card and put it on the table and say, 'Well you know it's just a mystery'. I want to say, 'Well maybe there's another way to go about this?' Maybe you ought to look at particular models of God, ways of thinking about God, and don't play that mystery card, and then ask the question, which of these models makes the most sense overall? At least that's been my approach.

**Alan** - So given that we have an open future, do you still think it's worth us praying?

**Tom** - I do. Let me answer this prayer question by looking at the way that many people think about God and why I don't think those views really actually make sense of Prayer. I'm assuming we're talking about petitionary prayer, not prayers of praise and that sort of thing, but asking God to do something...

**Alan** – Specifically in the light of coronavirus maybe...

**Tom** - Yes, the coronavirus would be a good example. So if you have a view that God controls everything, sort of John Calvin's view of God, if I had that view it would be hard to be motivated to pray for anything because God has already predestined and foreknown absolutely everything. So the future has already been settled. My prayers aren't going to change it a lick. But most people I know don't have that view of God. They have a God who gives freedom to at least complex creatures, who doesn't control everything (at least not most of the time) but they think, at least they seem to assume, that God can single-handedly, every once in a while, intervene to supernaturally bring about some event - stop the coronavirus, heal someone or whatever. Some kind of miracle of that sort.

Now if you are someone like me who believes in God and who wants to pray and thinks we ought to ask God to do some things, at least that's the way the biblical writers think about prayer, and you think God can do anything God wants to do, single-handedly bring about results, and you think God is perfectly loving and wants all the good that can be had in the world, and is so much smarter than you and me, it's really hard to get motivated to pray! I mean is God just sort of sitting on the side-lines arms folded saying, 'If you don't pray 87 times I'm not gonna do anything'. Well that's not a picture of a loving God. Does God have to wait around for us to ask Him to do something, in order for God to get into the game? I don't think so. That traditional view that says that God can single-handedly fix things and is just waiting for us to ask, it doesn't seem to present a picture of a perfectly loving God.

My view says this. First of all, God is relational so God is really affected by what happens in the world, really affected by my actions. And prayer is an action, so my prayer is going to have some kind of effect on God. Secondly, it says we live in an interrelated universe so that my actions have an effect on others and my environment, it has an effect on my body etc. In this world of an interrelatedness and a God who is relational, my prayers are actions that can actually open up new possibilities, new avenues, new opportunities for God to work in the world that may not have been

presented or opened up had I not done something, had I not prayed. It doesn't mean that my prayers somehow make God able to control things when God wasn't previously, but it's more data for God to use in the next moment, as God continues to work at the very utmost, in the most powerful ways. So that means that when I'm praying in relation to the coronavirus for instance, I don't think that my prayers somehow make it possible for God to 'stop the virus' single-handedly, because I don't think God can do that, but my prayers can open up new possibilities for God to act, especially in terms of how I and others might respond to this virus. Take precautions, do social distancing, all the kinds of things that we're all trying to do these days. In fact I like to say the things that you and I are contemplating on what we ought to do in light of the coronavirus like covering our mouths, social distancing, not going out as often, all those kinds of things presuppose our belief that what we do matters, like our actions have consequences. But if you've got a view of God who can single-handedly fix things, it's hard to imagine that our actions really matter to this God. My view actually makes more sense of the way we live our lives day to day than most of the traditional views.

**Alan** - I want to go back a little bit and drill right down into the heart of what God can't do. You say for instance God can't single-handedly stop a virus. Now I find it relatively easy to understand that His essentially kenotic love for humans might make Him not able to control humans who are making bad choices and what-have-you. But at the level of a virus? Do we think that the virus has agency, so that God is somehow loving so much that he wants to respect its autonomy? What is really happening there, that God can't intervene?

**Tom** - That's a really important question. Earlier we mentioned Process Thought and one of the ways that I have been influenced by Process Thought is that I affirm a version of what philosophers call pan-psychism. This is the idea that it's not just humans or dogs and dolphins that have some kind of agency, but cells have agency. Even, as physicists say, there's indeterminacy at the quantum level. Now I'm not saying that earthworms

have 'free will', maybe they do, maybe they don't. If they do it's really small but I do think they have responsiveness to their environments. In fact, cells have responsiveness to their environment and so if you're in medicine for instance you know that things aren't isolated one from another, there's an interrelatedness within the body. So my proposal says that God gives whatever agency is possible depending on the complexity of the thing we're talking about, whether it's a cell, a worm or a human, relative to how complex it is. And because God loves everyone, even the smallest entities of reality, God can't control even at that level.

So looking specifically at the coronavirus, I think one of the widely held misconceptions is that viruses are inherently evil. In reality, I read an article just recently that 99% of viruses are doing good in the world, are helpful. So I like to say that we should take the same approach that we have for, let's say, someone who is drug addicted. If someone's addicted to drugs and that's destroying their lives and their neighbours we don't say 'well let's just kill them, let's just destroy him'. No, we would say 'let's try to rehabilitate them, let's try to work to heal them'. What if we take the same logic and apply it even down to a coronavirus and say God's not in the business of killing things, God wants to heal them or call them to use their capacities in an appropriate way, in creation.

**Alan** – Again that picks up on a very important thing that you say, that God is always at work at every level. In that sense you are a Panentheist (I think is the word), that all things are in God, but God is still bigger than all things.

**Tom** - That's right, that's a very important point for me: I'm a panentheist. I have my own little language that I sometimes use in more scholarly papers, I call myself a Theo-cosmo-centrist. I ended up coining my own word, because there are so many different versions of panentheism that I wanted to have a weird word to describe my own! But the basic point is correct: that I believe God is present to all creation at all levels, and influenced by all creation at all levels, but is not the same as creation, I'm not a pantheist.

**Alan** - That's really helpful,. But here we are faced by this worldwide catastrophe and it's a big picture. So where do you really think God is in all of that. What is God doing?

**Tom** - I think God is active at all places in all times, as I've said many times in this conversation. But I think God is also calling, inspiring us to do our part in opposing evil and working for good. God's not sitting on the side-lines with this coronavirus, twiddling his thumbs, eating popcorn and saying 'Boy, look at them scramble there, boy, they're going through a tough time'. I think God is present with us, suffering with us but also empowering us and inspiring us to join with God to overcome evil with good, in cooperation. What makes my view a little bit strange to some people is that I think that humans aren't the only creatures in the world that can cooperate with God. It's really a way of extending what I think is the logic of uncontrollable love, not only to other creatures, but even down to the smallest units of reality.

**Alan** - You said at the beginning that this view is not completely mainstream, it's novel. How has it been received?

**Tom** - I expected a lot harsher criticism than I have been given! It's been surprising how well this book has done, it's been a best-seller on Amazon here and in the States for quite a few months, and still continues to sell very well. I find that there are three kinds of categories of people who are really attracted to these ideas.

The first category are people who think really seriously about theology and science and are exploring the big questions of life, I sometimes call this group the 'theology-nerds', these are the people who are going deep and they come across my writings and at least for many of them they go, 'Oh this makes sense, this kind of put some pieces together that I had kind of intuited, but no one had really expressed in specific language'.

The second group of people are people who are survivors of great harm. They're victims of evil. They're people who have wondered why God didn't stop the horrible things that happened to them, and now they have a picture of a God who wasn't sitting on the sidelines, but also wasn't causing this, or even *allowing* what happened to them. And this picture of a loving God makes so much sense to them. I get letters every week from people who've read this book, who have gone through tragedy or abuse and find this view hopeful.

The third group of people are kind of like on the margins. They're people who feel like they're not really a part of things. They have problems with the status quo. And if God is in control of the status quo and they're outside, then this doesn't make sense. But now, all of a sudden, here's a view of a God who hasn't endorsed the status quo, who isn't behind and supporting all the structures that have pushed them to the margins. There's all kinds of people who fit in this category, but what they share in common is some kind of marginalization.

**Alan** - Well I certainly found the book fantastically helpful, on a number of levels. I think it deserves to be widely read so thank you again so much for your time and your patience with the technical glitches that we had earlier but it's been great talking to you.

**Tom** - I've really enjoyed it Alan, thanks so much for inviting me to this.

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## **Future Medical Disasters - Dr John Day (notice)**

**Dr. John Day's** talk on **Future Medical Disasters** will be featured in our next edition: **Faith and Thought**, No. **70**

## Open Forum Q&A Session

**Q** = various attendees, **SW** = Simon Woodman, **TJO** = Thomas Jay Oord,  
**JD** = John Day, **AK** = Alan Kerry, **RA** = Bob Allaway.

**Q** – For Simon, do you say that the word Beast in Greek adds up to 666?

**SW** – Yes, if you take the letters of the word Therion and transliterate them into Hebrew, which obviously involves discarding the vowels then you end up with 666.

**Q** - We had a comment posted online that says that in Andy's earlier talk he said that we should be standing up and speaking out and that resonates a bit with what you were suggesting Simon, that we should be standing up against the earthly empires of power and privilege. How do we do that so that we are not denouncing people as 'The Beast' and that we are not struggling against flesh and blood?

**SW**- Well I think John *IS* denouncing a person, Nero, as the beast. He's saying that this person has so given himself over to works of evil that they have become a personification of the empire, so just as he's denouncing the empire as satanic, so also he points at the representative. I'd be very cautious to be running around pointing at people and saying 'that's a representation of the beast', but I don't think it's an inappropriate thing to do in every circumstance. One might look at Pol Pot or Idi Amin or Hitler, who have so given themselves over to works of evil that the most appropriate thing might be to say that, while we never put the possibility of redemption for any individual beyond the scope of God's love, at this moment, this person, that person is incarnating the beast, and sometimes it's helpful to say that. I think it's about unmasking evil where it hides, and inside the body of an emperor is a very effective place for evil to hide, because everybody is worshipping it. So to say that this personification is not of God, it is evil, is a very powerful unmasking of where evil is in society, and once it's unmasked it can be resisted. I'd be super-cautious about doing it, but I wouldn't want to run away from it completely.

**Q** – I much enjoyed your talk Simon, it's made me look at Revelation in a new light. Basically you're saying that revelation isn't specifically about the end times, it's really largely about the Roman Empire at that time, but because human nature repeats itself, so there will be beasts in the future. Can I ask, if you look at the words of Jesus in Matthew 24 where he talks about the end times, do you think Jesus there is referring specifically to the end times (the usual interpretation is that some of this is referring to the fall of Jerusalem and some to the end times)

**SW** – A couple of things, firstly I'm cautious about a harmonising approach between different New Testament texts. I think there's a variety of different theologies operative in the early church concerning beliefs around end times. Just as Judaism was fragmented, with some people believing in an after-life and some not, so in early Christianity, there are differences of opinion about what the future may hold. So I'm a bit cautious about trying to play Revelation off against apocalyptic Matthew. They both have a common ancestor in Jewish apocalyptic, but they're not necessarily doing the same things with it. I'm also cautious about trying to extrapolate from Matthew's gospel back to the historical Jesus, because we don't know what historical Jesus necessarily thought on this stuff. We can only know what Matthew does with it for Matthew's community, because that's the only text we have from that tradition. I'm just slightly deconstructing the methodology behind the question, but that said, I think we over-emphasise (because of our interpretive history of apocalyptic into the modern era) we over-emphasise it as being about the future whenever we encounter it, and I suspect pretty consistently in the early church, it's much more about God's eternity breaking into the present. So you experience the other world and then it breaks into the present in some way, then it's relevant to the world of the recipients of the text. I think the language of 'world-endingness' the language of 'futureness' is less about predicting the future and more about unmasking the present.

**Q** – I have a similar question for Simon, our Lord is specifically quoting Daniel about the 'Son of Man coming on the clouds' and his repeated reference to himself as 'Son of Man' was instrumental in his crucifixion, I

think. So whatever our view on historical Jesus that seems quite a central part to it, and seems to be the core in the Matthew 24 passage. Because he is quite specific about a whole series of different things, including one man being taken another not, which I guess links in with some kind of concept of a rapture. I'm just wondering that, if you take a more general view of scripture, the Son of Man seems to be quite a key concept running all through the Bible?

**SW** – Sure, I think when Jesus uses 'Son of Man' it is always in opposition to the title people are trying to put on him, which is 'son of David'. So the use of 'Son of Man' is a careful deconstruction of hopes for a Davidic monarchy and restoration of such. So you've got people trying to put onto Jesus a nationalistic hope and Jesus appeals to the apocalyptic texts of Daniel, (which is itself deconstructing Empire worldviews; Daniel is not about taking one empire and replacing it with another, it is about saying that the Kingdom of God breaks into the present, and this comes from the context of the second century BC). So I think Jesus is referring to Daniel as a way of deconstructing the attempts of people to put the Davidic monarchy on him.

In terms of linking it through with 'rapture', again you're wanting to make a link with 1 Thessalonians because the rapture isn't in Revelation, but if you have a harmonising approach to scripture you can then start reading it into Matthew, but it's not necessarily inherent in Matthew. Thomas Wright is interesting on the idea of the rapture, i.e. who's left behind and who isn't, in that he comes up with this idea of a conquering King returning back to his home city. And people go out to welcome him, and Thomas Wright suggests this image is used to address the fact that people are dying, not living for ever, so in the context of 1 Thessalonians, the people who are 'raptured' are the people who have gone to meet the coming King 'in the air' if you like, are those who've died and gone on ahead to meet the King in order to bring him back down to the earth, to the city. So it's in the context of pastorally dealing with the loss of believers through death, and the expectation that God is breaking in upon the earth. The idea that 'the believers are whisked up to heaven to go and live with God on a cloud whilst the earth faces the tribulation' is something you get with J N Darby,

the Brethren commentator from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Schofield reference Bible, but I don't think that's the only way of reading 1 Thessalonians or Matthew.

**Q** – A question for Thomas, you were talking about God not knowing the future, this only has meaning in time and time only has meaning because of entropy, because the universe is in bondage to decay. Therefore God as creator must be outside time, so God surely knows past, present, future as such? You may say he chooses not to control it, but he must be aware of it, and if he's not aware of it how can there be predictive prophecy as there is.

**TJO** - Great question. I don't think God is outside of time, and time doesn't require the kind of entropy that most folks think about. I think time just requires the forward movement of sequential moments, and whether not those moments are decaying or creative is a question that depends on the moment by moment. If you have a view of reality in which God is a part of it, and you think God is the creator who lovingly creates moment by moment, I think you shouldn't say entropy has the last word, but it is a part of the story. So I just find more plausible the notion that God is never outside of time or nontemporal, but God experiences time moment by moment.

As you rightly point out, that brings up interesting questions about predictive prophecy. I think the vast majority of prophecy in the Bible is not predictive in the sense that somehow God can know some specific events in the future. I think the vast majority is of the prophet standing up and saying, 'Look you people are doing the wrong thing, you're sinning and there are negative consequences to sin, so you better shape up, change your ways, reform etc.' I don't think you need to know the future in its entirety to realise that sin destroys.

Then there are a smaller number of prophetic passages in which God seems to be saying I'm going to do something in the future. Well I think God can make those kinds of statements without knowing with absolute certainty everything that is going to happen in the future. But I do admit there are a few passages of scripture which sound like somebody knows very specifically something that's going to happen in the future.

I think my favourite example is when Jesus says to Peter, 'Before the cock crows twice, you'll deny me three times.' That sounds very specific; it sounds as if in some way Jesus knows what's going to happen. To that kind of example (I think there's very few of those, but there are some) I just say, 'My theory doesn't fit that.' I'm OK with saying there are passages of scripture that don't fit my theory. I think the majority of passages fit my theory better than the 'god outside of time theory', but I don't think the Bible has a consistent view in that particular respect.

**Q** – (Regarding antinomies and contradictions found in scripture and in science:) If this is the nature of God, does that not in fact solve a number of different possibilities, that God is both absolutely sovereign and we also have free choice?

**TJO** – I'll home in on antinomies, contradictions, tensions, paradoxes. It seems you're saying, 'What if we just think that God is like that, doesn't that solve these difficult questions?' I don't find it satisfying, and I think it's interesting that the word you use is 'solve', because I don't think it 'solves' anything. Maybe it would be something like, 'Well we just have to accept it' or that it's beyond our capacity to understand these paradoxes, contradictions etc. I can understand that approach, but I don't like it, I don't find it satisfying.

I have a different kind of overall approach to theology which is to try to look at these difficult questions about the nature of time, epistemology, God's creation and the Cross, and present a particular model that tries to avoid paradoxes, contradictions, antinomies, etc. Then compare this model with other models on display. In this case, maybe the model you're offering is one that has a lot of interesting, important interpretations of scripture and science and God and theology, and you're recognising that there are real tensions and contradictions here, especially about God's sovereignty and human freedom. Well I'm trying to present another model. It doesn't have those, and it's probably not going to appeal to everybody, just like your model is not going to appeal to everybody, but my model is probably going to appeal to more of the people who really want to have that kind of coherency and rational consistency. But in doing so I might have to

reinterpret some of the important points you made about God dying, the nature of time, that sort of thing.

**Q** – Briefly to reply, I’m not saying it solves the problem, it’s a ‘black box’...even within science we make observations and we don’t always understand the causation behind it, but we don’t reject the observations. The universe is bizarre...we are constantly exploring and questioning how we intuitively perceive.

**TJO** – I think it’s always questioning that, and we always have to question our interpretation of our observations. It’s an ongoing process, I don’t want to come across as having the ‘right’ answer or the right perspective

**Q** – Briefly, what about the argument that if God is not in control of everything there could be a more powerful God who is. Therefore the first god is not the supreme God?

**TJO** - Yes I'll probably go at answering that a couple of ways. One is to follow some claims from scripture but also working from Saint Anselm’s view of God as ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived’. So if there is such a being who has more love, more power, something better than the one we currently conceive, that’s the true God instead of the one we currently conceive. So I will probably make that kind of conceptual move using St Anselm’s ‘perfect being’ theology.

**AK** - Thank you, I just want to see if we can shoehorn this into a slightly different direction. Picking up on the idea of entropy and whether creation is in bondage to decay or whether we have subjected it to decay? Andy is not with us but I thought his talk was excellent, and I want to read out another comment that was posted online which said ‘Andy has presented a manifesto for prayer based on Christian hope and that’s providing a basis for prophetic action by which I mean meaningful and substantial action not futile flag-waving - Amen Andy! I’d like to engage with Andy and others of like mind in composing this in terms and at the scale that Andy is addressing. Would the Victoria Institute like to facilitate this?’

(Ed - There have been earlier talks on the subject in conjunction with Christians in Science, if this would be of interest please contact the administrator at [admin@faithandthought.org](mailto:admin@faithandthought.org) )

**Q** – (For Thomas) My reading of the bible suggests that the universe and God has a certain flexibility or else prayer wouldn't be meaningful, but also that there are some fixed points, the Bible talks about Jesus being 'slain before the creation of the world' and so that seems to indicate that when God created the universe, His salvation plan was built into this. My reading would be to say that built into the creation of the universe was that Jesus will come to the earth at a certain time and be born at a certain place. Would you agree with that or do you think that's a wrong interpretation?

**TJO** – I think that's a possible interpretation that can fit my general framework. But I'm not committed to the specificity which that involves. I guess my general answer would be, 'Yes, I think that can be a plausible possibility, but one doesn't have to go in that direction. One could, for instance, interpret Jesus being slain before the foundations of the world as a symbol of God's intention to bring salvation, but maybe not know exactly at particular time or day in the future in which Jesus will be crucified. But I am very much in agreement with your claims about flexibility. I'm what, at least here in the States, we call an 'Open and Relational Theist'. You have some Open Theists in the UK as well. We're people who think that God can't know the future with certainty but that doesn't mean that God can't decide to do things in the future. Perhaps the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is a specific plan God has from the beginning of our universe.

**SW** – Could I just come back in here because we're back in the world of the Book of Revelation and of course it's not Jesus who was slaughtered since the beginning of creation it's 'The Lamb'. Now, 'The Lamb' is one of the images of Jesus, but it's the lamb in Revelation 13 that the quote refers to. There are textual difficulties with that passage and a number of divergent textual traditions relating to it but I just wanted to note, before you build too much theology on that one image from that one verse in Revelation 13:8; it's a textually complex verse with a history of interpretation in a number of directions. I know that some people have taken it into Calvinism

and have wanted to do the whole predestination thing built on it. The way I've read that typically is that the sacrifice of Jesus had a universal significance both backwards and forwards in time from the moment of the cross rather than anything more than that.

**Q** – For Thomas again, at the end you said we should be joining with God in opposing evil, but earlier in your talk you seemed to downplay a personification of evil as Satan. What are your views on this?

**TJO** - My view is compatible with belief in an ontological being called Satan and with the ontological being of Demons. My view is also compatible with those who reject those views. So I myself have swung back and forth on that question. When I was younger I was very involved in prayers for exorcisms and things. Then I swung to the other direction which thought that we could give naturalistic explanations to all the phenomena that we previously thought were produced, or at least were consonant with, demonic activity. I'm currently in a place in which I'm not committed to either one of those. In fact I just gave an academic paper on the subject. I've kind of come to the place where I'm looking for an overall explanation of reality including God's action in the world and those aspects that we think are evil and negative. I can appreciate arguments that say that those are somehow influenced by the demonic, but I'm not committed to those.

**Q** – (For Simon) I found your concept of Revelation being like Science Fiction very interesting and informative. Science fiction is important and valuable, I have an iPad and they were on Star Trek ages ago! It raises possibilities about the future and it's also teaches us lessons. Do you think Revelation tells us anything concrete about 'The End'? And how do we deal with the deep typology running all the way through scripture e.g. the cherubim. What is that typology pointing to?

**SW** – OK so does Revelation tell us anything concrete about the end? I'm going to hedge my bets and say perhaps in a slightly quantum way 'yes and no'. I don't read Revelation as in any way directly predictive of events that are going to happen in the future. I think it is revealing God's truth about the events of the first century and the people to whom it was written by

and for. However, I think as part of that revelation you catch a glimpse of God's eternal nature, and of humanity's standing before God. Those things remain constant now, in the future and in the past when it was written. So I think, yes, there is something about the way God has related, relates and will relate to humanity which is revealed by the visionary world that the text offers us and invites us to step into, but I don't think it's predictive. It's not the AA guide to the end of the world. I reject those kind of approaches, but I have Brethren family, so I'm no stranger to the very schematized 'I'm ticking them off as they happen, we're living in the last days' approach. I just reject it as a misreading of what the text was trying to do at the point at which it was written. But I do think it tells us a lot about the way God functions in relation to humans, and God's intent to draw creation and humanity within his love and in an eternal embrace. So I think there is something profoundly hopeful about the future there in it, without that being predictive about what the future is going to look like.

In terms of typology, I'm slightly sceptical of overly typological readings. You have the four living creatures before the throne, which within the Christian tradition become the four gospels, as portrayed in many cathedrals. Of course that's not the intent at the point at which they were written. It depends when one dates Revelation, I tend to date it at around 71AD, relatively early, just after the destruction of Jerusalem, and at that point it's very likely that John's gospel is not written, Matthew's gospel has not been written, Luke's gospel has not been written, probably Mark has, so this isn't the four evangelists of the gospel, but it becomes that in the Christian tradition. I think what we have here is the representatives of all creation worshipping at the throne, so you've got the beasts of burden, the birds of the air, the wild beasts in the lion and humanity in the one with a face like a human. I think what that's trying to convey is that humans are only one facet of the whole of creation. That captures something of the environmental side that would be quite helpful for us to draw out now as we're looking at doing environmental theology.

**RA** – The 'cherubim' are the four creatures in Ezekiel. They're also connected in the synagogue with the 'Holy, holy, holy' prayer, and they

carry the throne of the Lord who is abandoning Jerusalem when Ezekiel sees them. Therefore, if you're correct about when Revelation was written, this was just after the Lord has abandoned his temple in Jerusalem, so there is a direct link there with Ezekiel.

**SW** – That's very helpful, I'd not thought of it in those terms. I know John's using Ezekiel, and a lot of his imagery comes from the Hebrew Bible, but he never just borrows directly, he always filters through his own theological lens. So there's a disconnect as well as a connect between what John is doing with the images and their origins in the Hebrew scriptures.

**Q** – (For John) You mentioned in your talk 'who is to blame' and you showed a picture of Trump and the W.H.O. but you seemed to leave it at that point and I just wondered what you were trying to convey by that?

**JD** – I was just trying to add a little bit of controversy so that somebody would want to ask me a question at the Q&A! I mean I can see why Trump and others are upset about the World Health Organisation: that there does seem to be some, shall we say, bias towards China. But then many global organisations do seem to feel that if they don't foster good relationships with China then they are going to in some way lose out on funding or whatever. I think also the US has been a major donor to WHO and perhaps feels that the WHO owes it to the US to have some sort of bias towards their priorities. My point really was that they are one of the very few global voices that we do have on health and in the absence of the W.H.O. who have we got to fly the flag for the poor and the diseased and the disenfranchised in this world? That's not to say that there aren't other organisations such as CDC in the US and UNAIDs and their focus on HIV. As an aside, it's interesting now that the US has pulled out their funding. I understand that possibly the major funder of the WHO now is the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation, so it may well be that it's going to start falling on individuals rather than nations to be key funders.

My other point was that we hear a lot in the news about how coronavirus has pulled people together. Unlike in a true war there is no enemy that you can actually blame, we can't really have a have a debate with a virus. The

flip side of that, and I think we will see that increasingly as the pressure of the virus gradually diminishes that we might start to see a greater division and a blame-game setting in.

**AK** - Thank you to everybody for taking part, that was most stimulating.

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## Book Review

**John D. Rempel, *Recapturing an Enchanted World, Ritual and Sacrament in the Free Church Tradition*, IVP: Downers Grove, Illinois; 2020; xviii + 222pp, with Bibliography and Name, Subject and Scripture indexes. pb, about £17**

I found this book a joy to read. This was partly because it was written in English that any reasonably educated church member could follow.

It was also because it was written in such an irenic spirit. Writers on the sacraments often set up caricatures of their opponents' views, the better to demolish them. Rempel genuinely seeks to understand the good in them and build bridges to his own views.

Reading this was also refreshing. Rempel is prepared to follow

historical evidence where it actually leads, rather than looking for what supports preconceived theories, and this can produce 'out of the box' conclusions.

Firstly, I should explain the title. "Enchanted" is a formal sociological term for a world-view in which "everything physical and spiritual was part of a larger whole held together by God." (p5) This means the universe can be "sacramental", "matter can mediate spirit" and, for Christians, the "presupposition" of this "is the incarnation" (p6)

By contrast, the Enlightenment "disenchanted" the universe. The universe was seen as nothing but matter following scientific laws. Zwingli and the early Anabaptists, though they reacted against Catholic 'superstition', still

recognised a 'spiritual', 'mystical' presence in the sacraments. (p45) Unfortunately, their successors too easily bought into the Enlightenment world-view, which reduced the sacraments to human witnesses to our faith, in which God does nothing (my summary, not Rempel's).

Rempel wishes to restore the sacraments to their place within an incarnational, Trinitarian faith, particularly as elaborated by the Anabaptist Pilgram Marpeck. (See my article on the latter, "Evangelical Engineering", in the April 2004 [No 35] *Faith and Thought Bulletin*.)

Sacramental actions also meet human need. When we meet a long absent friend, we don't just say 'Hello', we express our feeling physically by shaking hands or embracing (until the Covid19 virus!) This "ritual" reinforces our words.

In his third chapter, he refers to Christian worship he has experienced around the world, from ancient Chaldean liturgy in Iraq to Black Pentecostalism in

USA, pointing out the rituals that they all have (even if they don't admit it) and the useful functions these serve.

His fourth chapter explores 'The Sacramentality of Time': the Christian week and year.

Rempel is a Mennonite, a denomination similar to Baptists, but strongly pacifist. He describes the deep impression that his own baptism as a believer made on him. For him, water baptism marks both our turning to Christ (and away from the false loyalties of the world) [p66] and God's enabling us by the Spirit [p68]. This, with other insights, gives Rempel a strong standpoint from which to conduct ecumenical dialogue with those who baptise infants, rather than simply condemning them.

One traditional division among believer-baptist denominations is between those holding to Open or Closed Communion. Rempel argues we should maintain both! There is evidence that early Christians had two, different, ritual meals. One was our Lord's

Supper, which being rooted in the Jewish Passover was a covenant meal, and therefore, in some sense, Closed. But there was also a separate, communal meal, the *Agape*, (which Rempel argues was a distinct meal, not an alternative name for Communion). The best Gospel model for this would be Jesus' feeding of the multitude, but that was Open. [p167] Hence, Rempel argues we should hold services based around both kinds of meal,

and he provides model liturgies for both, as an Appendix.

While unable to hold a Communion service, my own church held an open air service using prayers from his Agape liturgy, in which we gave away bread rolls (in hygenic, unopened packaging from the supermarket) to all who attended.

Bob Allaway

(revised from an earlier review for Baptist Ministers' Journal)

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We welcome contributions to the journal in the form of original papers, book reviews or short pieces for inclusion in 'Particles'. Please email any of these to [admin@faithandthought.org](mailto:admin@faithandthought.org)

Do not worry too much about formatting, but the following points are helpful:

- We prefer footnotes to endnotes where possible
- A short note describing the author, in about 25 words, should be included.

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