



Paris, Paris- COP 21, a personal reflection and review

A Special JRI Briefing (13 December 2015)

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Introduction

The COP21¹ climate change meeting in Paris has now ended. It ended in a historic agreement, but there is so much information out there that it is difficult to assess it all. What follows is a personal view, and it cannot hope to be comprehensive. I have watched during the long run up to the event, and over the last couple of weeks as things unfolded. In this briefing I will cover the process leading up to the agreement and give an assessment of the final text. Writing for The John Ray Initiative (JRI), I also wanted to report on what Christians have been doing in the last few weeks, and we will look at that in the later sections of this paper. But let us begin with some science.



The Scientific Background

COP21 took place against a background of increasing scientific certainty that we have a serious problem with climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 5th assessment reports of 2013 and 2014² had set much of the context, but even since then things have become more definite. We are now moving steadily past an atmospheric concentration of 400 ppm.³ That is largely a psychological barrier, but it is an important milestone. We are currently seeing increases of about 2 ppm every year and we cannot keep doing that. Most authorities suggest that 2014 was the warmest year in the instrumental record.⁴ It is extremely likely that 2015 will be warmer still.⁵ We are now about 1°C above the pre-industrial temperature, halfway to the 2°C by 2100 target which was agreed at the Copenhagen climate change meeting (COP15) in 2009. Two degrees is often seen as the safe level of warming above which we have real problems, but many scientists would prefer a 1.5°C target, although whether that is feasible is open to discussion.⁶ We only have to think a little about what a 1°C rise is already meaning for many poor people in the world- what will happen at double that??

In the middle of the Paris negotiations, Storm Desmond hit the United Kingdom bringing with it record rainfall, much flooding and damage to property. Campaigners were quick to associate the storm with climate change, and to suggest that we might see more such

events in the future.⁷ Of course it is always difficult to associate single events with climate change, but Desmond fits with a pattern of events from around the world. Certainly Storm Desmond gave some context to the Paris negotiations for those in the UK.

The Sceptics

It follows from the above that the “pause” or “hiatus” in warming, much loved by climate sceptics in the last few years, seems increasingly unlikely to hold.⁸ In fact, at least in Europe, climate scepticism seems on the retreat. There has been no repeat of the “Climategate” episode that we saw at the time of COP15 in Copenhagen.⁹ Most sceptics now seem to have admitted that there has been warming in the last century and that this is likely to continue. They now appear to be less concerned with science of climate change, and they concentrate more on economic arguments: it is too expensive to do anything about climate change; and it is not fair on the poor that they should be denied the benefits of fossil fuels. We also see quite a lot on the benefits of higher atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide and higher temperatures for plant growth. All these arguments can fairly easily be refuted. Just how much trouble the sceptic lobby is in was well illustrated by a report by Adam Ramsay on their fringe meeting in Paris.¹⁰

The one very serious issue we still have with climate scepticism concerns the United States. Sadly, many climate scientists in the States still have to put up with all sorts of harassment.¹¹ Moreover the Republican Party, and particularly their presidential candidates for next year’s election, are a considerable worry. There is not one that accepts the scientific consensus.¹² But the election is still a year off, and for now Obama is in control, despite some attempts by Republicans in Senate and Congress to derail his climate change policy.¹³

The Process and the Politics

To some extent the process leading up to COP21 can be dated back to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992. We covered the history of the process up to 2012 in a previous publication, and we will not repeat that material here.¹⁴ Rather we will concentrate on the last year. The major emphasis of the COP21 process has been on producing a global, binding agreement to cut carbon emissions. For months ahead of COP21 nations submitted their individual climate action plans, including how much they were intending to cut emissions. These were the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs), and they were supposed to be submitted by 1st October 2015.¹⁵ In the end 186 nations submitted their plans and their INDCs. All this work was marshalled by the tireless Christiana Figueres, the executive secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.¹⁶ Surely she must be a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize?? But the snag was that when the INDCs from individual countries were added up the figures did not look that good. Using different methodologies scientists came up with different results, but the overall picture was something between a rise of 2.7 and 3.7°C above the pre-industrial temperature by 2100.¹⁷ So that is better than “business as usual”, which might lead to a 4.5°C rise, but the

emissions cuts promised before Paris were nowhere near enough to reach the 2°C target. So COP21 in Paris began with everyone knowing that there would be work to do to reach even 2°C.

First up in Paris were the political leaders. President Obama of the United States produced an impassioned speech: "For I believe, in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., that there is such a thing as being too late. And when it comes to climate change, that hour is almost upon us. But if we act here, if we act now, if we place our own short-term interests behind the air that our young people will breathe, and the food that they will eat, and the water that they will drink, and the hopes and dreams that sustain their lives, then we won't be too late for them."¹⁸ Other world leaders also gave positive speeches, setting the tone before the negotiations began.¹⁹ President Hollande of the host nation, France, noted that "never have the stakes been so high because this is about the future of the planet, the future of life." Prime Minister Modi of India wanted a "comprehensive, equitable and durable agreement that leads us to restore balance between humanity and nature."

What were the main issues at COP21? Obviously we cannot cover everything, but there were a few topics that stood out. The first of these was whether the 2°C target was the right one? Low lying countries saw this as too high, and felt that sea level rise at 2°C might totally wipe them out. They pushed for a 1.5°C target instead. Other states began to rally around this position. The EU formed an alliance with Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific looking for an ambitious deal.²⁰ The United States later joined the "High Ambition Coalition". Surprisingly, Canada also backed a 1.5°C target only a few weeks after an election brought in a much more climate-friendly government.²¹ Some nations, including India, were less enthusiastic about a 1.5°C target. Whether the revised target would even get a mention in the final agreement was in doubt.

Then we have what is known as the "differentiation" problem.²² Back in the days of the Kyoto Protocol it was much clearer what constituted a "developed country" and what was a "developing country". But since then some countries, including Brazil, China and India, have shown rapid development. So which category do they fit now? This is important as it is widely recognised that the more advanced countries should be the ones who rapidly cut emissions and give money to the developing countries for climate adaptation. China and India often argue that the developed West achieved its wealth through burning fossil fuels, and that they should be allowed to do the same. This is all connected with the money problem which we will cover below.

By midway through COP21 it was clear that two issues were crucial, trust and money. Coral Davenport, writing in the New York Times, explained this in some detail.²³ Essentially the major concern of the developed nations was transparency. They needed to be able to verify that nations were sticking to their agreed targets. As Davenport pointed out China had recently been discovered to be burning 17% more coal than previously thought. So the United States and other developed countries were pushing for some sort of international verification body to check that nations were doing what they said in their climate action plans. Some developing countries stated that they simply did not have the necessary technical ability to do this monitoring, and would need help. Others were concerned that

monitoring could be intrusive. The real problem was that if some sort of monitoring system could not be agreed then the deal would be considerably weakened.

But money remained perhaps the biggest obstacle. The argument is fairly simple. The developed nations have caused most of the climate change problem, and they should be the ones making the major cuts in emissions. Moreover they should be funding the developing countries to help them adapt to the climate change that has already happened, and that will occur in the future. In addition developing countries want help with renewable sources if they are not to use fossil fuels. Late in COP21, India gave a very firm indication that it would decrease its coal use if finance could be provided to develop renewable sources.²⁴

So there is my take on the COP21 process and some of the politics. The next three sections will look at what has happened around COP21: from a personal viewpoint; within the church; and involving JRI. We will then return to consider the outcome of COP21 and conclude.

Our COP21

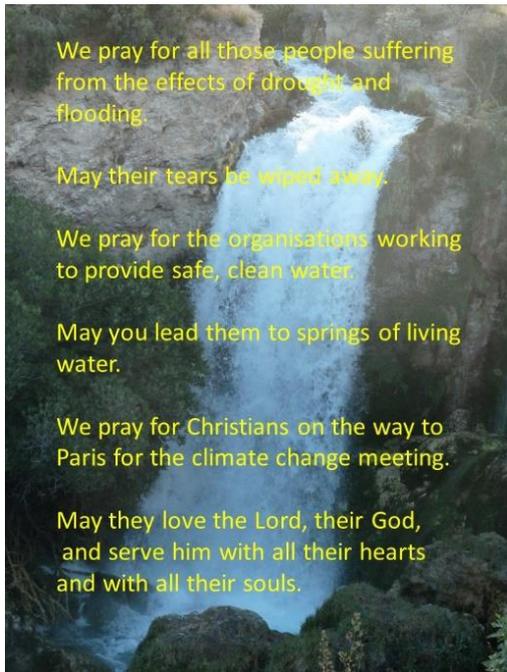
Our own personal build-up to COP21 took rather a long time! My wife, Margot, and I see our role in education and in producing resources, particularly for Christians. So we spent a lot of 2014 (including a three month sabbatical) working on two publications, both timed to come out in 2015 in the run up to COP21. So our Grove booklet “The Ethics of Climatic Scepticism”²⁵ appeared in February 2015. We had anticipated some opposition, but in the event we only had nice comments. Another sign of the waning of climate scepticism?

But I guess for us the real run up to COP21 began at the “Reconciling a Wounded Planet” conference in Coventry in September 2015.²⁶ Margot gave the opening homily, I gave a talk at one of the streams, and we launched our book “A Christian Guide to Environmental Issues”.²⁷ This book only has one chapter devoted to climate change, but the topic spreads into almost all of the other chapters. Climate change affects almost everything. Then from September to November I had a complete whirl of book launches and talks on climate change- some secular and some for Christian audiences. We also had quite a few radio interviews and invitations to write short articles, including (somewhat different) ones on climate scepticism for EthicsDaily.com²⁸ and three pages in the A Rocha UK magazine (November 2015).²⁹ And there were two more which we will cover shortly. As COP21 approached we spent increasing amounts of our our time monitoring the Paris meeting, trying to gather together very diverse sources, and to make sense of it all.

The Church

Church involvement in environmental issues has been growing in many countries and denominations for some time. It was given a huge boost earlier in 2015 with the publication of *Laudato Si* by Pope Francis.³⁰ That gave a theological rationale for the care of creation. In the lead up to COP21 pilgrims from around the world converged on the city. Yeb Saño, the

Philippines climate change negotiator turned activist led “The People’s Pilgrimage”, which culminated in a 930 mile walk from Rome to Paris.³¹



We pray for all those people suffering from the effects of drought and flooding.

May their tears be wiped away.

We pray for the organisations working to provide safe, clean water.

May you lead them to springs of living water.

We pray for Christians on the way to Paris for the climate change meeting.

May they love the Lord, their God, and serve him with all their hearts and with all their souls.

We particularly followed Pilgrimage2Paris, which was organised by Christian Aid, CAFOD, The Church of England and Tearfund.³² This involved walking 200 miles from London to Paris. About 40 people did the England section and 33 stayed the whole route. Margot’s sister-in-law, Elizabeth Perry, was one of those who completed the 200 miles.

Pilgrimage2Paris produced a booklet of reflections and prayers which was used daily by the pilgrims and others as we approached COP21.³³ I was asked by Tearfund to write a reflection on the theme of water. My reflection (Saturday 21st November) was entitled “Rain in its Season”, based on Deuteronomy 11:14 (I also wrote a prayer for the day which is in the picture). It gave Elizabeth quite a surprise when it was read out and reflected on in a huge cathedral-like church at Neufchâtel (France) in

the morning before setting off for another day of walking. She wrote to thank me and said the reflection about rain was “spookily relevant”; it rained most days on the pilgrimage! The pilgrims were a hardy bunch, and they made it on time into Paris on Friday 27th November. I sent them a tweet on behalf of JRI “Well done @pilgrims2paris on reaching Paris. You have been an inspiration to us all.” And they were.

The Pilgrimage2Paris reflections led on nicely to the [A Rocha UK Advent Calendar](#) with podcasts from well-known Christians behind each virtual door.³⁴ Margot was invited to do the [podcast](#) on Sunday December 13th, the third Sunday of Advent, just after COP21 finished.

Christians descended on Paris for a number of fringe meetings. A Rocha International and the Lausanne Movement collaborated on one with Rev. Dave Bookless, Dr. Katharine Hayhoe, Bishop Efraim Tendero, and Caroline Pomeroy speaking.³⁵ Bishop Efraim is the Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance, and he posted a reflection on his time at COP21 on the Tearfund Just Policy blog.³⁶ Archbishop Thabo Makgoba of Southern Africa was also in Paris for part of the talks and he wrote several blog posts detailing his experiences starting on Friday 27th November.³⁷ Pope Francis was not in Paris, but appealed to COP21 in very stark terms: “We are on the brink. We are on the brink of a suicide, to use a strong word, and I am sure that most of those at the COP have this conscience, and want to do something.”³⁸

Around the world prayers were said, vigils held, people fasted, and many Christians joined marches and demonstrations. Probably never before had the issue of climate change had such a high profile in the church.

JRI

JRI is a small organisation, and we could not take on too much even in the run up to COP21. We saw our role in education, and in the sharing of information. Nowadays much of this is done on the web, and particularly through the social media. Twitter is excellent for the rapid communication of news and ideas and was pretty indispensable during COP21. Many people think of Twitter as something to play with, but used properly it is a very powerful research tool. To give you a flavour of JRI activity on Twitter I have used [Storify](#) to aggregate the relevant tweets between 22nd October and 13th December.³⁹ You do not need to be on Twitter to be able to use this page. We also had several pertinent blog posts.⁴⁰ As already mentioned, I was often speaking somewhere in the weeks before Paris, and my wife, Margot, did a little as well. John Weaver was also active, and this included a BBC Radio Wales broadcast.⁴¹ Finally, Paul and Fran Houghton represented JRI at a climate change meeting in Reading on 5th December.

But the “normal” work of JRI has continued even with COP21 going on. During this period we have also been very busy setting up next year’s conference: “A Sustainable Future? A serious look at the new Sustainable Development Goals” (Saturday 5th March 2016).⁴² This year we are pleased to collaborate on this with ForMission College, A Rocha UK and Micah Global. [DETAILS](#) That will remind us that there are other issues, besides climate change, that we need to consider if we are going to live sustainably.

The Outcome

Well it was a day late, but there was a positive outcome from COP21.⁴³ How did those tricky issues we mentioned earlier work out in the final text of the “Paris Agreement”? Many sources have already come up with lists of the outcomes to avoid people having to trawl through the dense text of the agreement, but perhaps the clearest I have found so far is that in the New York Times by Sewell Chan.⁴⁴

It is quite remarkable that when we went into COP15 most people were talking about a 2°C above pre-industrial levels target, but now we have a 1.5°C target. Or at least 1.5°C is in the mix. The final text suggests that the target should be “well below 2°C” and that we should “pursue efforts to limit” the rise even more to meet a target of 1.5°C. This should be regarded as a major victory for the small island states and their supporters. Many would argue that 1.5°C is not a realistic goal, but psychologically it is hugely important. As this idea was being put forward during the negotiations Carbon Brief asked Myles Allen, professor of geosystem science at University of Oxford, for his view.⁴⁵ Allen's conclusion was that it was “not out of the question.”

On differentiation it seems that those wishing to reassess the developing / developed nature of countries have had some success. Whilst it is recognised that the developed countries (*sensu* 1992) will bear most of the responsibility for emissions cuts and finance, the statement also indicates that over time all countries will be involved.

One problem that we knew about before COP21 was that the best that was on the table from the individual country action plans and INDCs was something like a 2.7°C global rise by 2100. The hope is that as renewable technologies gain ground, governments will see that it is possible to cut emissions faster in the near future. So the agreement has a “ratcheting mechanism” built into it. Countries will be invited to submit revised INDCs for 2020, and then every five years. So many more meetings ahead!

The United States seems to have won the battle over verification, and it looks likely that there will be a single accounting system and an outside verifying body. The details of this have yet to be worked out. It does seem that the much talked-about figure of \$100 billion in climate-related financing by 2020 is still on the table, and that more would be made available after that.

Predictably there are already many people saying that COP21 is a weak agreement or “too little, too late”. But maybe this misses the point. Geoffrey Lean, the veteran environmental journalist, was in Paris as Laurent Fabius, the French foreign minister who was President of COP21, brought the gavel down to complete the deal. Lean reported: “The signs of agreement were visible on the floor in an hour long wait before Fabius reached the podium. The US Secretary of State and Xie Zhenhua, the lead Chinese negotiator, greeted each other warmly and Xie gave a thumbs up to the EU climate commissioner Miguel Arias Canete. Once the agreement was made, the hall erupted with emotion, with people weeping freely, hugging and exchanging kisses.”⁴⁶ Could it be that the spirit of the agreement was more important than what was written in it? Certainly there were many there in the negotiating teams for whom COP21 was more than just a job. It was their life’s work, and they will not stop there when they get home. So maybe we should put aside pessimism and cynicism for a while, and join with these good people in their pursuit of a better world.

The Future

COP21 has had a cast of many characters: scientists, politicians, civil servants, business people, members of NGOs, journalists, protestors, pilgrims, pastors, members of all faiths and none. It was always going to be a staging post along the way to a sustainable future. All of the agreements made at COP21 still have to be implemented on the ground.

Christiana Figueres has always argued that governments can only do so much to tackle climate change, and that big business will also need to be involved. There are already encouraging signs that this is happening.⁴⁷ Keith Weed, chief marketing and communications officer of Unilever, said: “Some people ask me, how can you have a business case for low carbon? I say how can you have a business plan for wrecking the planet.” Meanwhile mayors from towns and cities are also rising to the challenge.⁴⁸ As we saw above we need a “ratcheting mechanism” to get us down below a 2.7°C rise. We can ALL be part of that mechanism. We have seen that the church has had a major presence at COP21. Now is the time for our churches to step up their activities. January 2016 sees the launch of [Eco Church](#) by A Rocha UK.⁴⁹ If you are in England or Wales and have read this far I

encourage you to seriously consider getting your church onto this scheme. It is time to move forward!

Now the not such good news. The COP21 document has been drafted in such a way that it will not have to be reviewed by the United States Senate which is dominated by Republicans who would undoubtedly reject it. The biggest danger, to my mind, is the possibility that a Republican president might be elected next year in the United States. If that happens they will almost certainly begin to unravel Obama's climate change policies, and then the whole COP21 agreement could be endangered. I am not a very political person, or generally a "one issue" person, or somebody who likes to meddle in the politics of other countries, but the election next year is very important for us all. Prayer is needed on this issue.

But for now let us rejoice in what has been achieved at COP21. I will end with Pope Francis from *Laudato Si*: "Let us sing as we go. May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope."⁵⁰

Biography



Dr Martin J. Hodson is Operations Manager for The John Ray Initiative (JRI). He is a plant scientist and environmental biologist who speaks and writes widely on environmental issues. Martin teaches at both universities in Oxford. His recent publications include: *Cherishing the Earth* (2008, with Margot Hodson); *Climate Change, Faith and Rural Communities* (2011, with Margot Hodson); *Functional Biology of Plants* (2012, with John Bryant); *The Ethics of Climatic Scepticism* (2015, with Margot Hodson); and *A Christian Guide to Environmental Issues* (2015, with Margot Hodson).

¹ COP21 is short for the 21st meeting of the Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

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³ The website <http://co2now.org/> (accessed 7 December 2015) gives the October 2015 concentration as 398.29ppm.

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