

## Green Gospel: Christian Responses to the Challenge of the Climate Crisis

By

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**Abstract:** There is widespread acceptance that the world is facing a climate crisis, caused by the burning of fossil fuels. The Christian response, although initially slow, has gained pace over the last decade and the importance of faith communities in raising awareness and encouraging action was recognised by 2015, when COP21 took place in Paris. Approaching the next major conference, COP26, and in light of the Pope's 2015 environmental encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, the activities of a number of Christian organisations are set alongside the Pope's teaching. As with the pandemic still claiming lives around the world, only global collaboration can ultimately solve the climate crisis.

### Introduction

A decade is a very short time indeed in the history of the planet, but in the unfolding story of humanity's response to the climate crisis the years since completing my dissertation on Christian responses<sup>1</sup> have proved to be very significant indeed; the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century now feels like a very long time ago.

In 2011 I concluded that the 'duty of loving care towards the planet and all its inhabitants needs to become a central feature of the Christian message ... accompanied by scriptural backing and practical guidance encouraging God's people to be at the forefront of change', and there are some signs that this has started to happen. Faith-based NGOs are giving greater prominence to climate change as the most significant issue in relation to the alleviation of poverty and achieving social justice<sup>2</sup> and, together with Christian climate-change organisations, they are seeking to broaden the gospel understanding and mission vision of congregations that have traditionally shied away from involvement in political issues.<sup>3</sup>

On the world stage, climate change has achieved much greater prominence both across the media and within the public consciousness. In January 2020, vast tracts of southern and eastern Australia had been in flames for weeks after severe drought was followed by the worst wildfire season in many decades. Many millions of animals died, thousands of homes and businesses were destroyed and a number of people lost their lives in a tragedy that received worldwide media coverage. The Australian heatwave and fires followed on from extremes of weather all around the globe: in the

USA – which recorded fourteen separate billion-dollar disasters in 2019<sup>4</sup> – and in Thailand, Africa, Iran, Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh and Bhutan. There were deaths associated with many of these disasters. As a result, one journalist even suggested that 2019 might come to be regarded as ‘Year Zero of the climate apocalypse’.<sup>5</sup> There is also mounting concern about the loss of ice in the Arctic and the Antarctic, and how this may both cause sea levels to rise and exacerbate extreme weather around the globe, as average global temperatures inch slowly upwards.<sup>6</sup>

In the past decade the terminology has also evolved: from the sometimes confusing ‘global warming’ – which failed to acknowledge that in some areas it would not be desertification, heatwaves or drought but increased rainfall and harsher winters that might well be the result of climate change – to ‘climate crisis’ or ‘climate emergency’ as the timescales have narrowed in which changes can be made in order to reduce the probable impacts of increased levels of atmospheric greenhouse gases leading to higher global average temperatures.

While temperature records have continued to be broken year by year and extreme weather events have become more frequent, there has also been a growing recognition that faith communities – and the Christian Church as the largest of these – have an important part to play in raising awareness and encouraging action. This was particularly in evidence in the run-up to the 2015 COP<sup>7</sup> meeting in Paris, when Christians from many countries journeyed to Paris in a ‘pilgrimage of justice and peace, for people and for earth’.<sup>8</sup> When the French government, in the wake of earlier unconnected terror attacks, banned all public demonstrations linked to the COP21 meeting, around ten thousand pairs of shoes were left symbolically in the Place de la Republique and many of these were left by pilgrims from faith communities. As a visual aid this was a powerful message and reminiscent of the ‘sign acts’ of Jeremiah and Ezekiel.<sup>9</sup> Many of the climate pilgrims who became engaged with action in 2015 have continued to lobby for progress on tackling carbon emissions, calling – among other things – for Churches to divest funds from fossil fuel companies.<sup>10</sup> The next crucial COP meeting had been due to take place in Glasgow, Scotland in November 2020, now postponed until November 2021, and this will be a focus for prayer and action by environmentally aware Christians from around the world. In the UK, membership of the activist group Christian Climate Action grew from around 40 to more than 900 during 2019, demonstrating a very great increase in the awareness and engagement of Christians in response to climate change.

The work of Operation Noah, the Christian climate charity with which I have primarily been involved, has continued apace and it is currently working on a clearly defined, two-pronged approach. While continuing to collaborate with many other organisations, its own campaigns are focused on: persuading all the Church denominations in the UK to divest funds from the fossil-fuel sector; and outreach to Christians in their local churches to encourage engagement at every level with the issues around the climate crisis. It also uses social media to amplify the work of many other faith-based and secular organisations working to inform the public.

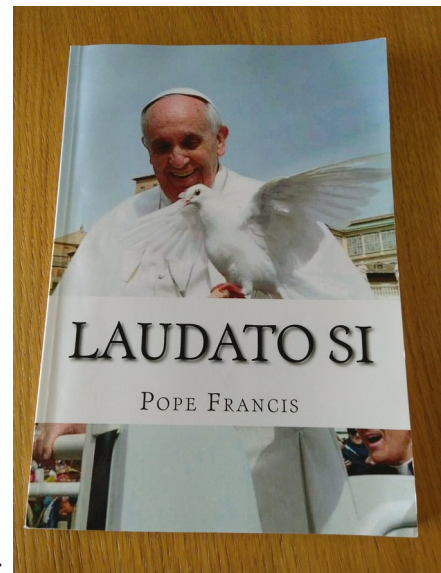


In the worldwide Church, one of the most significant developments was the publication, in 2015, of a papal encyclical letter by Pope Francis entitled *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*.<sup>11</sup> My further reflections on the years since 'Green Gospel' was submitted therefore concentrate primarily on selected aspects of this important and wide-ranging document.

## **Laudato Si'**

With an estimated global Catholic population of 1.3 billion this document, which automatically became part of the body of the Catholic Church's social teaching, immediately had a wide audience which has extended outwards as the scope and importance of the Pope's letter has been appreciated across other denominations and within inter-faith networks. In a recent book the encyclical letter is described as 'the most eloquent attempt to articulate a moral vision of the issue' [climate change].<sup>12</sup>

Pope Francis appealed (para 14, *Laudato Si'*) for 'a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet' and for enhanced education concerning the 'covenant between humanity and the environment' (paras 209-215). A *Laudato Si'* Institute was established as early as 2016 in Granada, Spain, with two specific goals: 'a) the study of and education in the care of creation in light of the Encyclical *Laudato Si'* and the tradition of Christian social doctrine; and b) the promotion of active initiatives for the application of the encyclical, and especially for the promotion of community development and entrepreneurship, particularly in rural areas, from Christian communities'.<sup>13</sup> (Care for creation is one of the seven principles of Catholic social teaching, and Christian social doctrine is a specific elaboration of the teaching, developed in response to a growing understanding of a situation. So the doctrine may change while the teaching itself does not.<sup>14</sup>)



The Pope also called for dialogue 'among the various sciences' (para 201) and between politics and economics 'in the service of life' (para 189). Among the initiatives responding to this appeal is a further new organisation. In October 2019 the University of Oxford in the UK launched a new research institute designed specifically 'to implement Pope Francis's vision ... to respond to "the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor"'. The *Laudato Si'* Research Institute (LSRI) aims to 'generate societal transformation through coordinated engagement with key Church and global players involved in policy and governance'. Under its Director, Professor Celia Deane-Drummond, the LSRI will bring together theologians with others in a forum committed to rigorous multidisciplinary research.

In a section of *Laudato Si'* looking at 'civic and political love', Pope Francis urged his readers to 'regain the conviction that we need one another' (para 229). He goes on to outline how love for one another can be expressed in the civic and political spheres, through 'love for society and commitment to the common good' and he suggests that it is this *social love* that is the impetus behind the development of strategies to halt environmental degradation. In recent years there have

been two movements that I would suggest exemplify this *social love*, although neither overtly acknowledge any specific Christian, or indeed religious, influence. First, the rise of an initially UK-based movement, Extinction Rebellion (XR), which is now ‘a global environmental movement with the stated aim of using nonviolent civil disobedience to compel government action to avoid tipping points in the climate system, biodiversity loss, and the risk of social and ecological collapse’ has resulted in more than 1250 local governments, and the parliaments or governments of twenty-five countries, declaring a ‘climate emergency’. The convening of citizens’ assemblies to help formulate responses to the climate crisis is among the key demands of XR and the national ‘Climate Assembly UK’ was convened in January 2020; it met over three months and presented its report to the six Select Committees of the House of Commons that had called for the citizens’ assembly in September 2020.<sup>15</sup> Another recent development, prompted by what they have seen as inadequate government action on the climate crisis, has been the drafting of a parliamentary bill by a group of scientists, lawyers environmentalists and others. The Climate and Ecological Emergency (CEE) Bill is a private member’s bill and received its first reading in September 2020. Sponsored and supported by politicians from a range of political parties, it seeks among other things to expand the scope of the ground-breaking Climate Change Act of 2008 and to set more ambitious targets for tackling climate change. Because of changes to the timetable of parliamentary sittings, the Bill has not yet had a second reading. Second, in 2019, Greta Thunberg became a worldwide leader of



*Brussels, Belgium. 21st February 2019. Swedish 16-years-old climate activist Greta Thunberg takes part in a march for the environment and the climate organised by students*

young people, who are quite justifiably calling on their parents’ generation – and particularly those in positions of political and corporate power – to act urgently to address the climate crisis. Then aged only fifteen, in August 2018 she began a ‘School strike for the climate’ outside the Swedish parliament and the resulting school strike movement has since spread around the world. She has addressed the United Nations, met the Pope and a number of world leaders, and convinced many people to review their lifestyle choices with the aim of reducing their carbon footprints. These mass movements, XR and the school strikes, are much larger than anything in existence just a decade ago and they have attracted support from

many Christians, who find in these forms of activism a practical way in which to demonstrate that while the science and the forecasting paint a gloomy picture, there is nevertheless hope.

Another positive aspect of these movements has been to create new communities of care and concern in which people make new social connections and find mutual support and encouragement in the face of the fear and depression that can accompany a growing awareness of the issues surrounding climate change. In this regard they have been aided by the rapid increase in digital connectivity, allowing even people who are unable to get out to meetings or engage in activism to have a sense of being part of something that they know to be important. This has been especially important since March 2020, when the coronavirus pandemic brought to a sudden halt the convening of almost all in-person meetings. Although cautioning against the breakdown of society that can be exacerbated by the isolation that these same media can encourage for some people (para

47), in *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis acknowledged the exciting possibilities that they offer. In many communities, these new groupings – local XR groups or ‘Green’ groups, for example – have found natural allies in the Transition Town groups that sprang up all around the world from 2007 onwards, committed to fostering resilience at both the community and the individual level. ‘Peak oil’, signalling the eventual exhaustion of fossil fuel supplies, was an initial concern of the Transition movement but now their focus is much more about ‘communities stepping up to address the big challenges they face’ and the ‘urgent need to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, greatly reduce our reliance on fossil fuels and make wise use of precious resources’.<sup>16</sup>

Pope Francis discusses the ‘globalization of the technocratic paradigm’ (paras 106-114) and is critical of the fact that modern economies adopt technological advances primarily with profit in mind and without reference to negative effects on humankind (para 109). Similarly, he points out that ‘when technology disregards the great ethical principles, it ends up considering any practice whatsoever as licit ... a technology severed from ethics will not easily be able to limit its power’ (para 136). For many who are seeking to address climate change, it is the fossil fuel industries that exemplify these characteristics and there is mounting evidence that some of them were fully aware of the dangers posed by emissions of greenhouse gases, and that the burning of fossil fuels was a major contributor. Not only so, but in some cases they initiated programmes of ‘misinformation, propaganda and political influence’ in order to thwart measures aimed at tackling the problem.<sup>17</sup>

Over the last decade it has been acknowledged that if runaway climate change is to be avoided then 80% or more of known fossil fuel reserves must remain in the ground and no new reserves should be exploited. The business models of those companies who continue exploration for oil or gas is therefore not compatible with care for the earth and Christians have been among those calling for institutions to withdraw their investments from fossil fuel companies and invest instead in clean energy technologies. There have been significant advances in this *divestment movement* since it began in 2012, and by April 2020 the total sum moved out of the sector was estimated as almost \$14 trillion (£10.2 trillion). It is faith organisations that have ‘led the charge’ on divestment<sup>18</sup> and this is one of the most significant Christian responses to climate change of the last decade.

Alongside these hopeful signs that Pope Francis’s message has been heard and is encouraging the ‘ecological conversion’ that he called for – and the other indicators that Christians are making a significant difference in responding to the threats posed by the climate crisis – it is worth sounding a note of caution. At a recent seminar,<sup>19</sup> a delegate asked why we should expect that *Laudato Si'* will be truly effective when it comes to achieving ecological conversion when the encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, from 130 years ago, ‘failed so miserably’ on social conversion. However, it is made very clear in *Laudato Si'* that the links between ecological conversion and social conversion are strong (para 48), with those who are already the poorest and most vulnerable being most at risk from the deleterious effects of climate change.



*Solar panels on the roof of High Street Baptist Church, Tring*

As a result, changes made now in tackling the climate crisis also have the potential to benefit those who are still disadvantaged by poverty or lack of resources. One example would be the huge expansion in the use of solar power, which can now provide low-cost energy to communities in areas where sunshine is plentiful but who have never previously had access to electricity generated from fossil fuels. At the seminar mentioned above, however, it was also pointed out that when the impacts of climate change begin to adversely affect the wealthy and powerful the process of ecological conversion can be expected to accelerate.

## **In conclusion**

There are a number of reasons why Christians have been relatively slow to respond to the climate crisis.<sup>20</sup> In reflecting on the ways in which the Christian response has developed over the past decade I have referenced a Catholic perspective in order to demonstrate that where Christians have engaged with the issues around climate change their actions have had many characteristics that are in line with papal guidance on care for the earth. However, to the extent that some Christians are still proving reluctant to provide leadership and guidance on creation care, the reasons for this have recently been extremely well summarised in a blog post by Dr Ruth Valerio.<sup>21</sup> Whatever our Christian heritage in terms of denomination, local culture or worship style, we are disciples of the same Creator God and share the same earthly home.

That global problems can result in concerted action by governments, corporations and individuals has been dramatically demonstrated since early 2020 in response to the pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus, Covid-19. In the space of a few short weeks travel, both international and local, was severely curtailed as ‘lockdown’ restrictions were imposed first in countries in Asia and then in Europe and America. Industries were rapidly able to convert production lines in order to aid in the production of additional protective equipment for medical staff, homeless people were found shelter and messages about avoiding food waste and ensuring supplies for the most in need were broadcast. World leaders acknowledged the importance of collaboration in tackling what was very quickly acknowledged to be a global problem and the public made clear their support for those whose work involved self-sacrifice and risk while openly criticising either politicians or businesses that appeared to be trying to take advantage of this quite unprecedented situation for their own gain. Most strikingly, perhaps, the rapid development, approval and manufacture of a range of vaccines to provide protection against this new disease has demonstrated just how effective concerted scientific endeavour can be as part of the response to a threat faced by every human on the planet.

Meanwhile, it has been noted that pollution levels around the world fell sharply, with a resulting fall in both morbidity and mortality associated with poor air quality. Emissions of greenhouse gases decreased during the early months of 2020, but there is no indication that the changes and improvements have been maintained in the longer term. The economic impacts of the pandemic will be severe but amid the calls for financial aid to help businesses to return to normal in due course there are many who recognise that, to quote Peter C Baker, ‘... disasters and emergencies do not just throw light on the world as it is. They also rip open the fabric of normality. Through the hole that opens up, we glimpse possibilities of other worlds.’<sup>22</sup> It was the *normal* pattern of activity that resulted in the worldwide spread of a new and deadly disease, a disease that originated in animals

and possibly crossed into humans because of the increasing pressure that we are putting on the non-human creatures with whom we were created to share the planet, and a disease that spread rapidly because of the modern speed of travel around the globe.

The COP26 meeting is now due to take place in November 2021, and Christian campaigners on the climate crisis, alongside others, are working hard to seek a way forward that might allow the coronavirus pandemic to be seen as a wake-up call to the world to stop exceeding the planet's limits. Deforestation, biodiversity loss and climate change all make pandemics more likely but as the value of scientific expertise has now been recognised by politicians, perhaps science can be used to design economies that will mitigate the threats of climate change, biodiversity loss and pandemics. It is my earnest hope that together the worldwide Church will, as recommended in *Laudato Si*, increasingly work alongside other faith communities, science and technology, business and politics, to seek solutions and new ways of moving towards a sustainable future for all life on earth.

## Biography

Nicola L. Bull, MA, MSc, MPhil, MLitt has been a trustee of the faith-based climate charity, Operation Noah, since 2012 and served as Chair of Trustees from January 2015 until July 2020. She is a science graduate, mother of four adult children and an active member of her local Baptist church, which in 2020 became the first Baptist church in the UK to gain Gold Eco Church status under the A Rocha award scheme.



## References

<sup>1</sup> Nicola L. Bull, 'Green Gospel: Christian Responses to the Challenges of Peak Oil and Climate Change' MLitt. Dissertation, unpublished, submitted August 2020.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, 'Song of the prophets: a global theology of climate change', Christian Aid, November 2014; [https://www.tearfund.org/about\\_us/what\\_we\\_do\\_and\\_where/issues/climate\\_change/](https://www.tearfund.org/about_us/what_we_do_and_where/issues/climate_change/) accessed January 2020; <https://www.worldvision.ca/our-work/climate-change> accessed January 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Christian Aid, 'The Time is Now' campaign, 2019; *Tenants of the King*, Operation Noah, 2018; Christian Climate Action, <https://christianclimateaction.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.climate.gov/news-features/blogs/beyond-data/2010-2019-landmark-decade-us-billion-dollar-weather-and-climate> accessed January 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Geoff Goldrick, *Guardian*, 20 December 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/dec/20/2019-has-been-a-year-of-climate-disaster-yet-still-our-leaders-procrastinate> accessed January 2020.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.climate.gov/news-features/features/antarctica-colder-arctic-it%E2%80%99s-still-losing-ice> accessed January 2020.

<sup>7</sup> The Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/pilgrims-for-climate-justice-plan-to-impact-cop-21-in-paris> accessed January 2020.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Sign acts are nonverbal actions and objects intentionally employed by the prophets so that message content was communicated through them to the audience.’ Kelvin G. Friebel in *Jeremiah’s and Ezekiel’s Sign Acts* (Bloomsbury, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, <https://brightnow.org.uk/>.

<sup>11</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home* (Catholic Truth Society, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Nathaniel Rich, *Losing Earth: The Decade We Could Have Stopped Climate Change* (Picador, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.laudatosiinstitute.org/en/about-the-institute/> accessed January 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Cf one of the Five Marks of Mission of the Anglican Communion: ‘To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.’

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.climateassembly.uk/about/>, accessed April 2021.

<sup>16</sup> <https://transitionnetwork.org/about-the-movement/what-is-transition/> accessed January 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Nathaniel Rich, *Losing Earth: The Decade We Could Have Stopped Climate Change* (Picador, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/environment/fossil-fuels-divest-climate-change-global-warming-emissions-campaign-a8681931.html>, accessed January 2020.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Human Dignity and Mother Earth’, 21 January 2020, Blackfriars Hall, Oxford.

<sup>20</sup> See Nicola L. Bull, ‘Green Gospel: Christian Responses to the Challenges of Peak Oil and Climate Change’ MLitt. Dissertation, unpublished, submitted August 2011.

<sup>21</sup> <https://ruthvalerio.net/environment/why-have-christians-not-responded-sooner-to-the-climate-crisis/>, accessed January 2020. Dr Valerio has many years of experience of Christian engagement with the issue through her work with A Rocha and Tearfund, and has written extensively on justice, environment and lifestyle issues, particularly from a Christian perspective.

<sup>22</sup> *Guardian* online, “‘We can’t go back to normal’: how will coronavirus change the world?”, 31 March 2020.

## Pictures

Brussels, Belgium. 21st February 2019. Swedish 16-years-old climate activist Greta Thunberg takes part in a march for the environment and the climate organised by students

Royalty-free stock photo ID: 1319306954, by Alexandros Michailidis

<https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/brussels-belgium-21st-february-2019-swedish-1319306954>

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