

EXPLOITATION OF THE EARTH, EXPLOITATION OF PEOPLE¹

by Revd. Dr. John Weaver

Introduction

To quote Pope Francis (*Laudato Si', mi' Signore*, Vatican, 2015), the world fails to hear the Cry of the Earth and the Cry of the Poor. He expressed the need for global, sustainable, integral development, in which climate is a common good or a global common.

The growing expansion of economic activity throughout the world is placing great pressure on both the planet and the human population. Alongside the environmental crisis there is also a social crisis – immense poverty, social exclusion, and attacks on human dignity in a world that is rich in consumer goods and opportunities for the economically secure.

Amongst the side effects of global climate change are modern slavery and human trafficking. The political ideologies, policies, and actions of governments, and the economic, market, and social decisions of global companies have contributed to the exclusion and impoverishment of many poorer peoples, who remain largely voiceless.



Beach strewn with discarded life jackets and other debris indicating human trafficking^{P1}

The Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah (24:5-6) gave God's warning; the prophet seeing the exclusion of the poor and the degradation and exhaustion of the environment as the results of ignoring God's care of creation and God's justice expressed in the Covenant. Isaiah presents the alternative covenantal way of life, which brings peace and plenty as opposed to the destruction that comes through foreign gods, political, economic and military alliances (Isa. 24:4-12; cf. Isa. 5:1-7; 19:9; 32:14-20; 41:18-19; 55:58:13-14). In the final chapters (40-55) hope is presented when relationships are

restored between God and humanity, and the earth is restored to fruitfulness and harmony (Isa. 55:10).

Climate Change

The sixth IPCC scientific report² notes: it is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land; the scale of recent changes across the climate system as a whole and the present state of many aspects of the climate system are unprecedented; human-induced climate change is already affecting many weather and climate extremes in every region across the globe; and evidence of observed changes in extremes such as heatwaves, heavy precipitation, droughts, and tropical cyclones, and, in particular, their attribution to human influence, has strengthened.

It is considered that global surface temperature will continue to increase until at least the mid-century under all emissions scenarios considered; global warming of 1.5°C and 2°C will be exceeded during the 21st century unless deep reductions in carbon dioxide (CO₂) and other greenhouse gas emissions occur in the coming decades; and many changes due to past and future greenhouse gas emissions are irreversible for centuries to millennia, especially changes in the ocean, ice sheets and global sea level.

Limiting global warming requires limiting the emissions of CO₂ and methane. To keep global surface temperature rise below 1.5⁰ C will require rapid and far-reaching transitions in the world economy: in energy use, land management and farming, urban development and infrastructure (including transport and buildings), and in industry. Increased food production for an increasing population adds to the burden placed on natural resources and increases greenhouse gas emissions, with negative effects on land use, soil, nutrients, water, and energy. We see the impacts on ecosystems with the mass extinction of species, and the degradation of natural resources resulting in some places becoming uninhabitable. This is leading to migration and the displacement of people and their resulting vulnerability. It is observed that global climate change is resulting in civil unrest as the need to secure useable agricultural land and fresh water leads to violence. It is predicted that there will be over 300 million environmental refugees in the next 20 years.



Demonstration - 'Fridays for Future' - Climate Change^{P2}

The impact of climate change on society involves issues of social justice and equality. It is in such a context that exploitation through modern slavery and human trafficking is established and thrives. An anthropocentric ethical stance based on extrinsic values (what's good for us), which governs much of western attitudes to the environment, extends to the commodification of people whereby relationships, the common good, and the intrinsic value of persons and the environment, a function of theocentric ethics, is lost.

Civil unrest, migration and vulnerability

In 2019 the UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) reported that the number of forcibly displaced people has reached 70.8 million.³ These include 41.3 million internally displaced people; 25.9 million refugees; and 3.5 million asylum seekers. Behind the statistics each number is a person with a name, a family, a home, and a history. Contrary to popular opinion, the western nations, predominantly of Europe and North America, are not flooded with refugees, as 82% of all refugees are hosted in non-western countries, who have few resources to meet their needs.

Climate change is increasingly being recognized as a major factor behind people movements. A study in 2015 suggested that the drought in Syria from 2006 to 2010 aggravated the tensions which led to the outbreak of civil war in 2011, forcing over twelve million people to leave their homes. It has been found⁴ that the more temperatures in a country's key agricultural regions rose above 20⁰ C in the growing season, the more people left their homes to seek asylum. The report in *Science* predicted that hundreds of thousands of additional asylum seekers will arrive in Europe each year if global temperatures continue to rise unchecked.

A comparison of global maps showing the worst effects of climate change and areas of civil unrest demonstrates that many of our current conflicts are partly due to environmental factors. As large populations begin to search for fresh water, land that will sustain agriculture, and safety from violence and war, pressure builds in the places where migrants travel and political tensions arise between nations. Often conflict and violence erupt as a result. For example, the civil war in Syria and the resulting rise of ISIS/Daesh emerged in the aftermath of a year long drought and water shortage in the Tigris-Euphrates Basin; climate change acting as a trigger in a complex political situation. The massive population shifts led to tensions in the cities that contributed to the outbreak of civil war. This has been followed by hundreds of thousands of vulnerable people seeking to flee to Europe with their resulting exploitation by criminal gangs, including those who trap these refugees in trafficking.⁵

Women are especially vulnerable as reports by the UN Migration Agency show that women originating from climate vulnerable areas are being exploited. Criminal agents promise employment but instead sell vulnerable women to brothels where they are sexually exploited.

Many industries that are open to human trafficking or labour exploitation also have a detrimental impact on the environment and contribute to climate change. There are numerous, well-documented cases in which environmentally damaging extractive industries are underpinned by large



Workers in a field outside Rome, Italy^{P3}

numbers of migrant workers in forced labour situations. In South-East Asia and Brazil, the lucrative palm oil industry is heavily dependent on coercive labour practices. This industry exemplifies the link between forced labour associated with modern slavery, industrial-scale and often unregulated logging, and the widespread destruction of the Amazonian, Bornean and Sumatran rainforests.

We recognise issues beyond the obvious for what climate change is going to mean. It has to be understood in the wider context as a primary driver of migration, human trafficking and movement of people in a warming world. It is therefore vital to improve the ability for vulnerable communities to stay in place so that they won't be tempted or lured away by human traffickers.

Love of God; love of neighbour; exploitation, vulnerability and justice

Ecology teaches us that everything is interconnected, as environmental degradation affects social structures and cultural identity, and the very meaning of life and community. We must consider what kind of world we want to leave for those who come after us.

The consequences of climate change affect the most vulnerable people, and we recognise that it is one of the causes of poverty and forced migration, which are breeding grounds for modern slavery and human trafficking, forced labour, prostitution and organ trafficking.

Environmental harm and ecological harm directly impact the poor and are the result of destruction and exploitation through a web of production and consumption that is environmentally unsustainable and spiritually damaging – a toxic combination.⁶



Aerial view of huge greenhouse farms near Almeria, Spain^{P4}

Pope Francis called for an ecological conversion, whereby we adopt a Christ-like approach to God's creation. Yet there is no prospect of this happening without reform of the purpose and governance of corporations. There is a need to move away from the primacy of shareholders and a pattern of working that shows little concern for the environment or even the most vulnerable members of society.

Economic thinking based purely on the 'market' tends to assume that there are unlimited natural resources, which clearly there are not. Ecological concern reflects our intrinsic human value as citizens, whereas the market economy emphasises our extrinsic value as consumers.

Our moral and spiritual engagement with the effects of climate change amongst the poorest of the world must be attentive to the plight of migrants and refugees, and their exploitation, often as trafficked people, and recognise how our lifestyle has contributed to their plight.

Extreme poverty, social exclusion, and environmental injustice appear together in communities all over the world. A central message of the Bible is of a redeeming God who sets the captives free. Christians are challenged to join in God's mission to bring liberation to the vulnerable and displaced.

The Old Testament year of Jubilee (Lev. 25) was to include cancelling all debts, setting all slaves free, and re-creating God's fair distribution of the land, but it was never celebrated. It is only with Jesus that Jubilee is declared (Luke 4:18-19), which caused his hearers to be amazed. Jesus declared that he had come to set the captives free.

Conclusion

As Christians we have a moral responsibility. Christ is not only Lord of the lives and bodies of Christians but Lord of the whole created order. The implications of the resurrection extend beyond the lives of Christians to reveal God's intention to restore the righteous peace, or *shalom*, of the whole of creation.

Righteousness and justice, which are intrinsic to the being of God, are also writ large in the material and moral framework of the creation which God has made, and with which God remains in continuing relationship. We have here a powerful insight into the ecological nature of divine justice, and of created justice.

At the heart of the Christian message is hope. We can speak of the hope of judgement; that there is accountability for our lack of care of the poor and of the environment. This hope is based on God and God's justice and grace, which is not thwarted by human sinfulness. Ultimate hope is in God and is eternal, while human hope is temporal and uncertain. As Christians we are called to a hopeful discipleship in the light of our ultimate hope in God's promises and purposes.⁷ We are called to love God and love neighbour, which will include the example that we present in our lifestyle: our attitude to those who the world often ignores or despises; our consumption, and

especially our use of fossil fuels. This will also include our political will through our engagement in the political process, seeking to influence politicians and businesses to make social and environmental considerations a priority in legislation and planning.

In a world where modern slavery and human trafficking can be a hidden and overlooked blight on humanity, Christian disciples are called to embody an alternative narrative, sovereignty and hope – to express an alternative model of society.

In Christ we live as hopeful disciples, restored to our full humanity as God’s stewards of creation, embodying the image of God, who has declared creation good and calls on human beings to exercise a godly care of the whole of creation.

We listen to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.

Biography

John Weaver was born and brought up in Cardiff. After taking degrees in Geology at Swansea, he taught at the University of Derby. John trained for Baptist ministry in Oxford and was then pastor of Highfield Baptist Church from 1981-1991. From 1992-2001 he taught theology at Regent's Park College, Oxford, and from 2001-2012 served as Principal of South Wales Baptist College. He is a former President of the Baptist Union, and former Chair of JRI, and is a Vice-President of JRI. His main areas of research are: relating faith to life and work; theological reflection; adult education; and the dialogue between science and faith.



References

¹ This paper is an extract from my chapter, ‘Exploitation of the Earth, Exploitation of People’ in Dan Pratt (editor), *Slavery-Free Communities. Emerging Theologies and Faith Responses to Modern Slavery*, London: SCM, 2021, pp.254-277

²https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGI_Headline_Statements.pdf, accessed 12.08.21

³ UNHCR, ‘Figures at a Glance’, <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html> accessed 09.12.19

⁴ Missirian, Anouch, and Wolfran Schlenker. “Asylum Applications Respond to Temperature Fluctuations.” *Science* 358, no. 6370 (2017) 1610–14. <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/358/6370/1610.abstract>. Quoted in Kevin Durrant, *Courting Chaos. Navigating the Ecological Crisis with the Help of Jeremiah*, Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications, Wipf & Stock, 2021

⁵ María Teresa Dávila, ‘The option for the poor in *Laudato Si*’: Connecting care for creation with care for the poor’, in Vincent J Miller (Ed), *The Theological and Ecological Vision of Laudato Si*. *Everything is Connected*, London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017, p.149

⁶ María Teresa Dávila, ‘The option for the poor in *Laudato Si*’: Connecting care for creation with care for the poor’, in Vincent J Miller (Ed), *The Theological and Ecological Vision of Laudato Si*. *Everything is Connected*, London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017, p.145-59

⁷ See my exploration: ‘Hopeful disciples in a time of climate change’ in Stephen Finamore & John Weaver (editors) *Wisdom, Science and the Scriptures; Essays in Honour of Ernest Lucas*, Regent’s Park and Bristol Baptist College, 2012; Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2014.

Picture References

^{P1} ‘Lifejackets’ Free Image by Jim Black from Pixabay

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^{P3} ‘Workers in a field outside Rome, Italy’ Royalty Free Image 4433935 by Alex Cantarelli from Pexels

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^{P4} Aerial view of huge greenhouse farms near Almeria, Spain by Novikov Aleksey, Royalty Free stock photo ID: 1198166203

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Inspiration for JRI is taken from John Ray (1627-1705), English naturalist, Christian theologian and first biological systematist of modern times, preceding Carl Linnaeus.

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