

THE ESSEX HALL LECTURE 1990

HOPING FOR A FUTURE



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The Essex Hall Lecture 1990

HOPING FOR A FUTURE

Martin Palmer

There is a story told of a Cambridge College. About ten years ago, the College discovered it was having certain financial difficulties. As if this was not enough, the dons also learnt to their distress, that the beams – vast oak beams – of the College Hall needed urgent replacement. They were over 300 years old – the beams that is, not the dons! The College Council met – advised by "people from the city" and decided that in order to deal with the financial crisis, they would sell most of an ancient wood they owned and dismiss the foresters. A decision on the roof was delayed till the next meeting.

At the next meeting the old head forester was summoned and told of the planned sales and redundancies. Shaken, the forester was asked to wait in the room while the remainder of the agenda was discussed.

The item regarding the replacement of the oak beams came next. The dons learnt that there was no option but to replace them. The cost of buying oak beams was devastating. A quiet cough came from the corner where the old forester sat. The dons ignored him. The city analysts had suggested selling more land and perhaps one of the great medieval manuscripts in the College Library in order to pay for the wood. In the moment's silence that occurred the forester spoke.

"Excuse me sirs, but the beams are ready."

All eyes turned on him. An explanation was demanded. Slowly the forester told them how 300 years ago, the original beams of the medieval hall had been replaced. Whereupon the dons of that day had ordered oaks to be planted upon the very land the college planned to sell. Each head forester had been told about "The Hall" oaks. They were now ready to be felled.

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The dons swiftly reversed their decision on selling the land, and reinstated the foresters.

"Then I take it sirs," replied the forester, "that we may plant out the new Hall beam oaks we have been raising in the nursery?"

Many would now dismiss that story of how people once planned for the future – hoped for the future. We don't live in that sort of a world we are told. Things are happening too fast. You've got to change, grab the moment or be passed by. I believe that this approach is potentially a future-less, even at its worst, a hopeless understanding of the future. Yet, the concept of "take now"; of "you only live once" or of "my happiness" has come to dominate our culture. Its roots lie historically in our Judaeo-Christian past – but the original concept of one life on earth has become sadly corrupted. It is that original concept and its twisting that I want to start with, for within its strange story lie the psychological roots of our current ecological crisis as well as the roots which could nourish our hopes for the future. For you see, what we believe the future is capable of being, profoundly affects what we do now – and thus to a greater or lesser degree actually creates our future.

There is a Talmudic tale which mirrors the story of our dons. A foolish rabbi passed an old, old man planting a fruit tree. The rabbi stopped and asked the old man in a mocking tone.

"Old man, why are you bothering to plant that tree? You will never live long enough to enjoy its fruits."

"True", said the old man. "But the fruit trees I enjoy now, they were planted by my forebears. I will not eat of this tree, but my children and my children's children will."

To which, I need to add but one more Talmudic saying. If you are planting a fruit tree, and someone comes running to you saying "The Messiah has come!", just finish planting the fruit tree – then go and see the Messiah.

The future is no accident! The future is, to a very great degree, what we believe it can be. I use the word "believe" quite deliberately. And what we believe the future is to be, profoundly affects what we do here and now, not the least with regards to the environment. Let me give two, extreme, examples.

In Australia, the Aborigines believe that the future, the present and the past co-exist in any given place. Through their Dreamtime stories, they recount the stories of how life came to their area. In the act of retelling, of re-performing these Dreamtime stories, they ensure the continuity of that life

force. By handing on their stories to the next generation, they are ensuring the future. Their relationship with the land is so close that any destruction of the sacred area is like a knife wound in their hearts. For them, the future is in the past as enacted in the present.

Under President Reagan in the mid 80's, James Watt became Secretary for the Interior and thus had responsibility for the environment. He is a born-again fundamentalist Christian who believes that around the year 2000, Jesus will return, destroy all evil doers and this present world, and create a new one. So, argued Mr Watt, why preserve the forest, coastlines or natural resources. Use them up now – as the future is going to give the Justified a new heaven and a new earth.

Different expectations of the future – different attitudes to our world.

Look around you. Look at how we are treating our physical world, the rest of creation. We will run out of most fossil fuels within a hundred years. In fifty years time we will have destroyed all but 3-5% of our rainforests. Before that, the sea levels may have risen to such a height, due to the greenhouse effect, that the seas will be invading the lowlands. In the twelve months since the last Essex Hall lecture, the planet is estimated to have lost over 10,000 species – extinct for ever – and mostly through our actions. Industrialisation; consumerism; profiteering; poverty; greed – all these are fuelling our use and abuse of nature. If we get governments to think in terms of policies, they are five year – maybe ten year plans at the most. No "Hall beam oaks" nowadays I'm afraid. We know we cannot sustain our present modes of consumption in the West let alone increase them. Yet there is little sign of any true political, economic or social will in our governments to act on this information. To feed the quest for gratification now, for the "pursuit of happiness" we seem to be preparing our own Armageddon of the future – and the not too distant future at that.

I said at the start of this lecture that our present short-term, selfish use of the world has its roots in our Christian past. I want now to look at this, for I believe that if we look at how our culture has traditionally conceived of the future, we can see how we got into this mess, and how we might find a way out.

Traditionally, at its best, Christianity has maintained a tension between two models or understandings of the future. Putting it crudely, these two are (a) Utopian; (b) Apocalyptic.

The Utopian model comes from the belief that God is about to create a new society. The Old Testament prophets were filled with utopian visions – of all the nations coming to Zion. Of the lamb lying down with the lion; of the

sword being beaten into the ploughshare. When Yahweh comes to reign, goodness and peace will reign also. The sufferings of the past will vanish and all will be well. In the New Testament, we find the same message, the same vision in the words and actions of Jesus and in the writings of St Paul and Revelation. Jesus came "preaching the Kingdom of God". He came to bring reconciliation. His vision of the perfect society was one in which each cared for the other – as outlined in the story of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. In his life he showed the depths of love – the hope of compassion – and changed people's lives as a result.

The Early Church expected the actual coming of the Old Testament vision of the Kingdom of God, any day. Conversion had its initial strength through belief that by conversion, one could partake in the glorious future – the Return to Eden. As the months, years and then decades increased from the time of Jesus' ascension, so the Church began to see the Utopia it hoped for, the Kingdom of God on earth, as an event to come at some time – but not imminently. The Kingdom of God on Earth was also an event or events which we could partake in. Through our lives, we can bring the Kingdom to be. Corporately we can bring the Kingdom to our world. When we do, the Christ will come to reign in glory, for the world will be worthy of his presence and able to understand his rule. This is well captured in the powerful vision of St John at the end of his Revelation. It is almost the last image in the entire Bible:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; the first heaven and the first earth had disappeared now, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the holy city, and the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, as beautiful as a bride all dressed for her husband. Then I heard a loud voice call from the throne, 'You see this city? Here God lives among them; they shall be his people, and he will be their God; his name is God-with-them. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness. The world of the past has gone.'

Then the One sitting on the throne spoke: 'Now I am making the whole of creation new' he said.

Revelation 21, 1-5

In Western social and political thought and action, this Utopia, this New Society, the Return to Eden, has shaped our history. Many of those who have striven for justice and for a new and better social order have been heirs of this vision. Marx was rewriting the prophets of his native Judaism when he wrote about the how as well as the wherefore of social transformation. Look at early Socialist or Marxist art to see how strong the Utopian, Age of

Innocence elements are in those beliefs. Simply study the traditional banners or posters of the great unions to see illustrated the vision of Isaiah; the hope expressed in the life of Jesus, or the images so powerfully wrought by Revelation 21. From the turn of the eleventh century, if not earlier, European movements for social change have been fed by this Utopian language and imagery of the Bible. The cry of the Peasants' Rebellion of 1381 serves as an example.

When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?

A fine and inspiring example of the power of the Utopian on an individual and then on history is given by Lord Shaftesbury. Lord Shaftesbury was an evangelical Christian who longed for the Second Coming of Jesus – a coming which would shepherd in a new era of justice, peace and humanitarianism. He believed that this was not only desirable but also possible. He desired it because he cared so deeply about the injustice, poverty, exploitation and cruelty of the newly emerging Industrial Age. As a politician, he sought to use all the means at his disposal to try and improve the lot of his fellows. Laws forbidding child labour; regulations on women's hours; edicts on working conditions; funds for housing and for sanitation were all important ways of trying to improve society. But for Shaftesbury they also had an even deeper purpose. They were all steps on the way to creating the Kingdom of God on earth. For Shaftesbury believed – in much the same way as Liberation Theologians do today – that if the world was made a juster, kinder and more hopeful place, then that would enable Christ to return. Once Christ returned, there would be no need for laws, or factory inspectors for Christ would institute a complete change in the quality of human nature. There would be no need for laws, because God's eternal laws would be written on the hearts of men and women, as Jeremiah prophesied:

See, the days are coming – it is Yahweh who speaks – when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel (and the House of Judah), but not a covenant like the one I made with their ancestors on the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant of mine, so I had to show them who was master. It is Yahweh who speaks. No, this is the covenant I will make with the House of Israel when those days arrive – it is Yahweh who speaks. Deep within them I will plant my Law, writing it on their hearts. Then I will be their God and they shall be my people. There will be no further need for neighbour to try to teach neighbour, or brother to say to brother, 'Learn to know Yahweh!' No, they will all know me, the least no less than the greatest – it is Yahweh who speaks – since I will forgive their iniquity and never call their sin to mind.

Jeremiah 31, 31-34

The Utopian vision was given great impetus within Europe by an unexpected accident of history. While much hope for the future draws upon Biblical images clearly orientated to the future, one strand has gone to the past. The Garden of Eden has had a most singularly influential role. No more so than at this time of ecological awareness.

The problem is that the post-medieval understanding of the Garden of Eden is not Christian. It is Islamic, but divorced from its Islamic context.

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, Eden was not Paradise. It was the earth itself. The Bible describes a world of harmony and of mutual regard. Adam and Eve are allowed to eat what they want – but they are to be vegetarians. Nor is their life just one long holiday. According to the Talmud they are expected to work. The story is told of how Adam was walking in the Garden. Seeing a pear, he reached up for it – but the tree withdrew the fruit from his reach. A little miffed, Adam wandered on. Seeing an apple, he reached up for it – only to have the apple tree draw the apple up out of his reach. Now rather put out, Adam saw a cherry and stretched out his hand to pluck it. But yet again the fruit was drawn out of his reach. Then, says the Talmud, came a great Voice which said, "First tend the trees, then you may eat of their fruit."

Then look at the Bible story in Genesis itself. When Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden – from in other words, the harmonious relationship within nature – God says that man must now till the soil by the sweat of his brow. There is no indication that he had not been tilling it before. The change after the fall, the new dimension is that this work, as with childbirth, will now be hard and painful. Until the late Middle Ages, the Garden represented a loss of Innocence and of a proper relationship with God and Nature – not a sort of time of total leisure – a divine holiday camp! This element came through Islam.

The visions of Paradise in Dante and Milton derive from text read by Dante of Arabic stories of Paradise; from the Islamic version of the Garden combined with the Islamic understanding of the Paradise to come. Here all is ease, pleasure, leisure, gratification and so forth. For Islam, this makes some sense. Paradise, our original home in Islam, is another planet. The Fall is literally that – a fall from our own planet to this, lower one. If you need evidence, go and see Adam's Peak in Sri Lanka. There you will be shown the imprint made by Adam's foot when he struck the earth.

The myth of a time of "happiness" as Paradise has become represented, is a dangerous one for the West. It does not fit within the cosmological story which Christianity and Judaism have fashioned. It belongs to Islam – a near relative of Judaism and Christianity, but not the same. This romantic reading

of Eden deeply influenced the development of the New World. They took the Paradise – happiness model and believed that they could develop it here on earth. The New World was a fresh start – a return to Eden, but not to the original Christian understanding of Eden, but the romanticised vision of Eden as a place where happiness was achievable. Here in the New World, it was believed, humanity could start again. The proper relationship could be established and the fruits of being in harmony with God would flow.

This myth profoundly influenced the growth of the American ideas of 'happiness' and the pursuit of happiness. Could anything be more illusory than that – especially for a culture which claims the crucified, suffering Jesus as its inspiration? The myth of happiness has become a prime force in consumerism. It claims to offer what everyone is entitled to have – Paradise. Yet nothing could be further from the truth nor more dangerous to our emerging ecological awareness. The myth of happiness, fraudulently claiming its origins in Christianity, is a great threat to our possibility of a future. It has in fact brought us to the edge of apocalypse – the second part of the Christian traditional tension of visions. For the relationship between utopia and apocalypse has always been one of two sides of the coin. To maintain a creative tension is the art.

Let us now turn to the second dimension of the Western understanding of the future – the Apocalyptic.

The vision of Utopia – of hope, joy and peace does not exist in isolation in the Biblical tradition. It co-exists side by side with some of the most terrifying visions of the End of Time – the Day of Judgement – the End of the World. In the great prophets of Israel, the hope of a glorious future was always set within the context of the likelihood of a terrible end of the dire warnings of Jeremiah (which have given the English Language the term Jeremiad).

The pictures of God's wrath on all nations as in Hosea and the prophecies of Daniel bear witness to the dark side of the future; to the dark side of human behaviour and its consequences.

When we come to the New Testament, the whole book is a drama of the struggle between the creative, 'utopian' – and the destructive – 'apocalyptic'. Most nativity stories acted in schools, forget to tell of the massacre of the innocents. But the story is there to show how light draws out darkness and vice versa. In Mark 13 we have Jesus' own words of warning about what the End could be like. The words make sombre reading:

When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed, this is something that must happen, but the end will not be yet. For nation will fight against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes here and there; there will be famines. This is the beginning

of the birthpangs.

Alas for those with child, or with babies at the breast, when those days come! Pray that this may not be in winter. For in those days there will be such distress as, until now, has not been equalled since the beginning when God created the world, nor ever will be again. And if the Lord had not shortened that time no one would have survived; but he did shorten the time, for the sake of the elect whom he chose.

But in those days, after that time of distress, the sun will be darkened, the moon will lose its brightness, the stars will come falling from heaven and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Mark 13, 7-8, 17-20, 24-25

But it is the Book of Revelation which has set the stamp upon our fears for the future. The language of that Book has profoundly affected how we see the future – and at times it threatens to swamp us. The Book of Revelation shows us the environmental consequences of human sin and rebellion. It shows God's wrath and the destruction which accompanies it. And its imagery has entered deep into our consciousness and sub-conscious. So extreme and disturbing is it, that many have felt it overstates the case and possibly even perverts the gospel of Jesus – that of love; of sacrifice; of non-violence. Indeed had half the Church had its way, the Book would not be in the Bible at all. The Orthodox Churches do not relish its inclusion. They argued against it being accepted into the Canon of Scripture. It only made it because it was assumed to have been written by John, the beloved disciple of Christ. To this day, the Book is never read in church by the Orthodox. Nor is anyone supposed to read it alone – for fear that the violent and terrifying imagery frighten people – or that the obscure, coded language lead people to try to 'interpret' these strange statements.

The Apocalypse is powerful because of the way we see time and history. In our culture, time and history are linear. They are believed to go from A-Z. There is a definite beginning – The First Day or the Big Bang – the terms are irrelevant. Life progresses from A-Z – evolution; the six days of creation; the rise of homosapiens – all these terms believe things have progressed in complexity and detail from point A onwards. All this is in stark contrast to the cyclical view of time which we shall look at shortly.

"But if," argue our brains, culture, faiths and scientific philosophies, "if there is an 'A', then there must be a 'Z' – a beginning presupposes an end." And it is on this that the Apocalypse builds – for both better and worse.

At its worst, apocalyptic thinking has led to some believing they will be saved, whilst rejoicing that the majority will be destroyed. For those who see the

world as fallen, lost, immoral, or simply wrong because it doesn't agree with them, there is a great comfort to be gained in believing that the "baddies" will ultimately get their come-uppance, and the righteous will be saved. In the past, some groups have felt God might need a little help in beginning the Apocalypse – like those who set up the Kingdom of God at Munster in the 1530's and promptly set about attacking other cities. But for many, the sense that God is in control and will act morally to end this world, is very reassuring – so long as you are sure you will be amongst those who are saved.

This has very disturbing consequences for those of us who believe God wishes us to care for this world of creation. We become objects of great fear to such people. Witness this letter sent to the magazine BBC Wildlife in April 1989:

My son has been a subscriber to your magazine for a couple of years, but until this morning I had never actually bothered to read it myself. Even though I have never been very interested in wildlife, I thought it was a harmless-enough subject, suitable for a 12-year old. But when I looked inside the February issue today I was shocked.

In the first two articles that I read – about two of the most disgusting kinds of animals I have ever heard of, tenrecs and hyaenas – you mention Evolution at great length and treat it as though it were scientific fact. You ask your readers to believe without question that tenrecs and hyaenas descended from some other animals over the course of millions – millions! – of years.

We are taught in the Bible that the world began between five and six thousand years ago, and that all the animals, including hyaenas and tenrecs, were created on one day, intact. I believe this because God is a lot more reliable as an authority than a mere mortal, Darwin, and I insist that my son be allowed to believe this, too.

I was also dismayed to see that you also seem to have an implicit allegiance to that other heresy, Environmentalism, which puts Nature above Man and is thus no different from witchcraft or voodoo. God gave Man a mind so that he could control Nature. He also gave man a limited time on earth before the Day of Judgement. Environmentalism attempts to postpone that Day – Armageddon – and this is sacrilege.

Your magazine not only supports these twin blasphemies, it also manages to be violent and pornographic. We are treated to pictures of hyaenas covered in blood while being told that females have male organs – and then that tenrecs have an abnormal number of breasts. Even in the marmoset article, there is speculation about who might be the babies' father.

I have cancelled my son's subscription and have told him never to bring another wildlife magazine into the house.

Mrs V Hamlett
Wandsworth

Yet, ironically, it is this language which a great deal of the environment movement resorts to in order to try and impress upon us the nature of the crisis we are in. Building upon the psychological building blocks we have briefly examined above, and without being aware of it, continuing a strand in Western thought that has appeared at all times of major social upheaval, the environmental movement shows itself to be, in one sense, a true child of its Christian culture. In report after report – in much the sort of language I deliberately used at the start of this lecture – running out of fossil fuels in 100 years; only fifty years of rainforest life left; the greenhouse effect raising sea levels etc – the apocalyptic language is used to alert us symbolically to the nature of our crisis. And given the Western belief in the linear flow of time and history and the 'only one existence' belief of our culture, there is some sense in this. However, there is one big difference between the apocalyptic language of the past and today. In the past, when the imagery was invoked, we knew it lay in the hands of God. Now, to a certain degree, we already are acting out the Apocalypse. The trees and waters are dying. Strange illnesses are appearing. What is even more worrying is that we could, through nuclear weapons, nuclear accidents and an acceleration of our abuse of the planet, enact the bulk of the Apocalypse – at least insofar as humanity and many of the world's species and eco-systems are concerned.

This has actually led to a number of right-wing religious groups becoming involved in politics. Their basic tenet is that Revelation and the Book of Daniel are accurate descriptions of a post-nuclear, environmentally wicked world. If this is what it takes to bring the Return of Jesus – so be it, these groups argue. To this end they work to increase the chances of nuclear warfare, of global conflict. For them, as for Mrs Hamlett, the destruction of the environment is an encouraging sign. It is evidence that the time is drawing nigh, that the Lord is rolling up the existing world in preparation for the struggle with the Anti-Christ and the End of the World. They have been the backbone of the Star Wars people, funders of the Contras and eager supporters of South Africa and Israel – the two most earnestly hoped for flash points for global conflict. Nor should we consider them fringe movements. The fundamentalist/right wing Christian element in US Government and army is very strong. They quite simply hope to provoke the Apocalypse.

Well, it's one way of dealing with the fear that lurks just below the surface of most of us in the West. Nuclear fear and now fear of a shrinking and fatally damaged environment.

At the other extreme the Apocalyptic image is used by peace and environmental groups to spur us into action. Yet, I would argue, because of an inability to recognise the roots of that image within the wider – and more hopeful – context of Christianity, the use of the image is increasingly backfiring.

The Apocalyptic vision only really works in the long run if it is fused with the hopeful vision of what we have termed the Utopian. This is the dynamic tension which Christianity at its best has traditionally maintained. For in Christianity, as in all major faiths, the end of time or the ending of this specific world, is a 'moral' action of an omnipotent divine force – God or Shiva or whoever. Take away the divine and moral context and you are already in conceptual difficulty. Take away or lose or discard the Utopian – the vision of the prophets – and you are left with a powerful symbolic trigger for concern, but no structure of hope-filled vision to direct it. To a great degree, this is why the environmental movement, whilst achieving a great deal of guilt and anxiety, is very poor at translating that into real work for the future.

I work a great deal with professional scientific environmentalists. Most of them believe we have passed the point of no return. That at the best, our scientific descriptions of what is happening will become simply the longest suicide note in history. They are overwhelmed by two factors. Firstly, the data chronicling what is actually happening to the planet; secondly, the belief that human nature is such that we cannot change and that therefore we cannot alter the future – our extinction and possibly the extinction of most of life on earth. In other words, the image of the future they work on, the expectation of what humanity can do to affect its future, is so gloomy, so incapable of change, they do not actually believe there is a future.

For you see, what we believe the future is capable of, becomes the future we plan and act for. What we do, how we plan and act is shaped by what we believe. If I believe Jesus wants to destroy this wicked world and pluck me and a few other 'chosen ones' to live with him in Heaven, then I will not give a damn for the future; for protecting the environment. Indeed, you might feel that the sooner this world goes the 'way of all flesh' – the better!

If conversely, I believe Jesus wants me to care for this world; to work to make a place of compassion and justice so that his Kingdom can come in individual lives and possibly for the whole world, then I will work to show this in my life.

Key to all visions of the future is the understanding of human nature. To return to the two examples given above, in the fundamentalist, millenarian model, the assumption is that humanity is wicked. That only the Elect, those predestined for glory from before time began, will be saved, and that that will be through no actions of their own. That the rest of humanity has been doomed since time began – then you can have no hope for humanity.

The second example does assume another idea of human nature. It assumes that humans are capable of acts of goodness; of love; compassion and justice. It is hopeful about the human condition. It also assumes people can change. That they can change from being destructive, cruel, selfish or what have you, to being denizens or harbingers of God's kingdom. Of course, such a view of human nature also has to accept that the good can become corrupt, for the possibility of change – metanoia as the New Testament Greek calls it, meaning an about turn, works both ways.

This is why Christianity when true to its centre has always fused the two models of the future – Utopian and Apocalyptic – because its concept of human nature has always assumed the ability to change; to convert; to repent – and thus the two models become viable possibilities. It all hinges on how humanity decides to go. The Way of God or the Way of mammon.

The crisis in the environmental movement, like so many apparently forceful movements springing from Christianity in the past, is that it has in many cases opted for either one or other of the two models – Utopia or Apocalypse – and has not developed an adequate model of human nature. This leaves it caught by a failure both of adequate vision, and of a method to achieve a hopeful vision of the future. Looking back over history, we can see many such failures within Christianity, when the dynamic tension between utopia and apocalypse was lost. We cannot afford to fail this time. The environmental movement has to succeed. This is why we have to get the balance right – our future quite simply hangs upon it.

Let me show you how the one sided vision is distorting and ultimately betraying the environment – the world of creation. The bulk of international conservation – the World Bank; IMF; national governmental strategies; the World Conservation Strategy of UNEP, IUCN and WWF, assumed that the only way people will respond to environmental issues and take action to change their behaviour, is by seeing it is to their own material advantage – that wretched happiness concept again! This is the appeal to self-interest. The contention is that by appealing to self-interest, we can use the forces which have fuelled destruction of the environment to save the environment.

An example. In many places, tourism is being mooted as the way to create environmental care. If you can market your wildlife and environment and make good money from them, then that may do more for your GNP than killing all the wildlife and destroying the environment. This works well – for a while. But ultimately you have built a fundamental flaw, a time bomb, into the equation. For if the criteria for the value of any species of eco-system is its simple financial and economic usefulness to us, then if a better economic use can be found, that will take precedence over care of the environment. Thus it is remarkable how reserves tend to be created in areas of apparently

useless land – not really suitable for agriculture. Then suddenly gold, copper, uranium or whatever is found under this ground and the reserve is immediately under threat. And logically, that is fair enough. If your vision of the use and meaning of the environment is linked to human well being and the ability of a government to deliver this financially, it makes sense to mine the area. That is why the self-interest model is ultimately on a hiding to nothing as far as long term survival of creation is concerned.

Or listen to the words of the World Conservation Strategy of IUCN, UNEP and WWF published in 1981 and now adopted as a basis for conservation by over fifty countries:

1. The aim of the World Conservation Strategy is to achieve the three main objectives of living resource conservation:
 - a. to maintain essential ecological processes and life-support systems (such as soil regeneration and protection, the recycling of nutrients, and the cleansing of waters), on which human survival and development depend;
 - b. to preserve genetic diversity (the range of genetic material found in the world's organisms), on which depend the functioning of many of the above processes and life-support systems, the breeding programmes necessary for the protection and improvement of cultivated plants, domesticated animals and micro-organisms, as well as much scientific and medical advance, technical innovations, and the security of the many industries that use living resources;
 - c. to ensure the sustainable utilization of species and ecosystems (notably fish and other wildlife, forests and grazing lands), which support millions of rural communities as well as major industries.

(World Conservation Strategy, published by UICN-UNEP-WWFM 1980)

It is telling us that the reason for saving nature is so it can fuel our industries, commerce and lifestyle expectations. But these, God help us, are what have got us into this mess in the first place. No vision here of the Kingdom of God on earth, of justice, or simplicity. The vision is of a selfish world, motivated by selfishness – trying to prevent the apocalypse because it will mean less consumer goods. What a failure of vision.

To put it boldly, because international, multi-national environmentalism does not maintain the tension that its historic religious roots – Judaism and Christianity – have maintained nor the vision of human nature as capable of both great goodness and great evil, it does not have a workable model for the future.

There are environmental groups which go against this. However, they have a tendency to fall the other way. They believe that humans can return to a Paradisical relationship with nature – the Islamic paradise rather than the Christian. They tend to swallow the whole Utopian model and forget likewise to maintain the tension with the Apocalyptic. This means that they postulate idealised visions of the future, which do not take account of the reality of evil, of destruction or even of simple, sad mistakes. Again, a poverty of understanding or lack of a philosophy of human nature is evident. How, one has to ask, can anyone plan for change unless they have an understanding of what it is within human nature that can be affected or changed?

I return to my underlying theme. What we believe the future is capable of being, affects what we do and thus creates the future.

I want now to turn very briefly from the Western, Christian model to look at a very different vision of the future. Christianity, the environment movement, modern economics – they all share a linear concept of time and to a great or lesser degree reflect the tension or dualism of utopia/apocalypse. Yet many great cultures of the world do not have this particular tension nor fall into this dualism. For them, as for the Aborigines which I briefly mentioned earlier, time is not linear; the future is not something to come, but has come before. For many cultures, time is cyclical. It does not move from A to Z, but round and round, repeating itself.

In this cyclical model, found amongst the faiths of Hinduism, Buddhism and other religions such as Sikhism and Jainism, there is no definite starting-point to life. There is no act of creation. Nor is there a final end, such as the linear model posits. Instead, there is a wheel of life which has neither beginning nor end. In this model of time, all things exist in a cyclical way. Within all life there is a spark of the Divine. This spark is what gives life to the physical forms which appear to us as different people or species. Death is thus the releasing of the divine spark from one particular physical form, in order that it may be reborn again, at some stage. In this model, living beings, worlds, universes and even the gods themselves are subject to birth, death and rebirth. There is no first origin and no final end. Each individual existence or life is important, but is not the only opportunity for living. Therefore, there is not the same emphasis on success in this particular life as there is in the linear model.

In this model, every action now, is an action partaking of the past – of karma – and creating the future – karma. What we do comes back to us. Nothing is just a part of a progression, but is a cycle which rolls with us and rolls us. In this cultural framework, the idea of not planting the "Hill oaks" would be unthinkable. The future is being made now and has been partly shaped in the past. It will come round again, just as the triad of Brahma, Vishnu and

Shiva reflect the continuous cycle of being. For Brahma creates, Vishnu sustains and Shiva destroys – and re-creates, for without the destruction there could be no re-creation. Nothing is lost, but all changes.

This model however has also produced a dualism. It runs the risk that people will simply hold up their hands and say, what can we do. Yet it should actually lead to the highest moral and ethical living, for it sees all actions as one – and thus as eternal. Any damage done to the chain of life, is ultimately done to me. To take more than I need is likewise to do violence to the chain of being. It is no accident that the great faiths of renunciation have arisen from cyclical belief systems. For if we all belong to the same chain, how can I – and what is I in a world of reincarnation – own things, for they own me and I them, but not in the normal materialist sense.

The intense urgency which the linear model gives to life, is quite simply largely missing from the cyclical. I have a Hindu colleague who knows he has been married in previous lives. He enjoyed being married. But in this present life, he has decided not to marry. This gives him more time and leisure to study the sacred writings and to advance in understanding of life. In turn, this will mean a better rebirth. In future lives he will marry again – which he looks forward to. But this life, well it's just one amongst many and so there is no rush.

There is also a profound difference between the linear and cyclical view when it comes to considering the worth of other creatures. Because life is a cycle and we pass through many shapes and forms in our journey round the cycle, there is really no idea of higher and lower creatures. All are suffused with the same spirit. As the Bhagavad Gita puts it,

A wise man sees as equal a learned priest, a cow, an elephant, a dog and an outcast.

Chapter 5, 18

It is perhaps in those moments when two cultures meet and react very differently that we can see most clearly the different cultural fruits of certain belief systems. I am always struck by the violence of the language which science uses to describe evolution, compared with the gentleness of the Biblical language or the language of the great Eastern faiths. Our post-Christian culture likes to talk about the "conquest of land" the "exploitation of the grasslands", the "fall of the dinosaurs" and the "victory of mammals". This has little to do with evolution, except that it feeds our sense of being at the top of a long, linear struggle of survival – that we in other words are the victors in life – the purpose of life itself. This also presents us with a failure of vision, for it means we have to be tough and mean to survive –

and that leaves little space for compassion.

Let me illustrate what we can learn when two cultures meet. When Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing reached the summit of Mt. Everest, Hillary planted the Union Jack and claimed to have conquered the mountain. Sherpa Tenzing knelt down in the snows and asked forgiveness of the gods of the mountain for having disturbed them. Which of those gives us greatest hope for a future?

There is no doubt that an encounter with the cyclical world view can shake up much of the comfortable thinking of the West. But it would be falling into the utopian model to believe that it will provide us with a blue print of answers to the issues which our own, linear culture has provided. However, to hear other views; to see other life styles can be enlightening and indeed has increasingly proved so in this century. At the very least it holds a mirror up to us and we can see ourselves, warts and all, more clearly.

This is why the interaction between the environmental movement and the world's religious traditions is so crucial. In 1986, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) International, invited the leading organisations of the world's major faiths, to come to Assisi to share their ideas and hopes for nature. I think the conservation bodies really just wanted the faiths to bless the work the environmentalists were already engaged in. What actually happened was far more dynamic and interesting. The encounter became a challenge – from both sides. From the side of the environmentalists, it was a challenge to the faiths to make real their fine teaching on nature. To be sure, the Scriptures, prayers and teachings of the faith about how we should treat nature are wonderful. But let's be honest – over the last 30-40 years, to what extent have they been lived out?

But the faiths also issued a challenge. They acknowledged that the conservation groups had indeed done a lot, but they questioned the fundamental moral and ethical premises which have underpinned environmental action. In particular, they questioned the appeal to self-interest; the human centred basis of evaluating creation and the apparent divorce of ecology from issues of justice and peace. There was a feeling that not only were the reasons for ecological action dangerously human centred – they were also naive about human nature and failed to offer a vision.

Since that epic meeting in September '86, the Network on Conservation and Religion has maintained that debate and interaction and there are now over 60,000 religious groups involved in ecological action, from Swedish Lutheran parishes to Baha'i Spiritual Assemblies; from Thai Buddhist wats to English mosques. Likewise, over 80 national and international environmental organisations are partners with these faith groups in working for the future.

In this interaction, the Christian faith has had to encounter its off-spring the environmental movement. Christianity, with centuries of experience, has noted the emphasis on the dreadful and the lack of the hopeful. At the same time, the environmental movement has seriously shaken the confidence of the Christian tradition by saying that because of the human-centred nature of Christianity, we have, advertently or inadvertently, gone down a path which has led us to the brink of a real Armageddon – an Apocalypse. The challenge has now become even more intense. Has humanity gone too far for the old model of dynamic tension to make sense? Or conversely, is it precisely the loss of that tension which confronts us with psychological and thus physical annihilation?

As a Christian, I believe that it is the loss of that tension which is leading us towards enacting what almost appears to be a species death wish. Yet, I am also deeply challenged, indeed threatened, by the terrifying data and picture of the state of our world which ecologists give me. Increasingly I believe that our environmental crisis is as much a crisis of the mind; of imagination; of the potential of human nature as it is a crisis of resources. To a very great degree, we are thinking ourselves into a corner and I believe it is in part the faiths which can help to stop this process.

I believe that we need to look the future in the face. We need to speculate, to guess and to hope. We need to decide whether we think human beings are capable of change, and if so, what motivates that change. Are we so materialistic that we really believe the only thing which makes us change is either fear of losing what we have, or desire to get yet more? Buddhism tells us that desire is what fuels the destructive processes which keep us bound to suffering. Yet our society seems to believe that this way lies salvation.

I believe people of faith have to celebrate both the wonders and the absurdity of humanity. We need to believe so strongly in the future for all creatures, that we can see ourselves for what we are. We have to stop ourselves falling either into utopian or apocalyptic ways – for ultimately, they are false. We need to find and maintain that tension which spurs us to action but does so because we know things can be different. Without that tension, we will either delude ourselves into extinction in the pursuit of 'happiness', or will ourselves into self-destruction through lack of vision of that which could come to be. In the end, we need to grasp and understand what the writer of Proverbs meant when he wrote, thousands of years ago,

Where there is no vision, the people perish.

It is in your hands, and in your minds and in your beliefs and in your actions, that the future of the world rests. Can you, can I, can we together, offer the visions that might, just might, turn our world about and lead us all, with the whole of creation, towards a world with a future? I believe so.

Martin Palmer



MARTIN PALMER was born in 1953 in Bristol, the son of the vicarage. Before going to university he spent a year as a volunteer worker in a Chinese children's home in Hong Kong – where his interest in other faiths and cultures was kindled. Having studied theology and religious studies at Cambridge, he moved to Manchester in 1977 as an advisor in religious education for schools. In 1980 he became the Fund Director of the Centre For The Study of Religion and Education, in Salford. This centre pioneered multi-faith education and in particular, work on the religious and ethical dimension of cities as human constructions of values. This and associated work with children and various faith communities led to Martin establishing the world's first international, interfaith consultancy, in 1983. The consultancy now works in many parts of the world and involves consultants drawn from many faiths and cultures. The consultancy is known as ICOREC (International Consultancy On Religion, Education and Culture).

As part of the consultancy's work, Martin is religious advisor to the World Wide Fund for Nature* (WWF) International and WWF UK. He planned and ICOREC organised, the 1986 Assisi gathering of all the major faiths and conservation bodies, which launched the Network on Conservation and Religion. Martin is also Head of the World Council Of Churches' programme on inter-cultural education and an executive staff member of the Sacred Literature Trust International. Over half Martin's time is currently spent working with the world's faiths and conservation bodies, developing joint ecological projects. Martin, an Anglican lay-preacher, is married – his wife Sandra lectures in religious education – and has two children, James aged 11 and Elizabeth 7.

* formerly known as the World Wildlife Fund.