



5th July 2004

I

Last August, in the middle of all the anxieties about climate change triggered by unprecedented temperatures, George Monbiot wrote in the *Guardian* that 'We live in a dream world', in which 'the superficial world of our reason' is constantly overtaken and frustrated by the deep, unspoken assumptions that really shape our responses to the world around, those assumptions that make us project 'our future lives as repeated instances of the present'. If we lived rationally, we should be taking instant action about those features of our present life which are making the human future more and more precarious. Since Monbiot wrote, the WHO has estimated that deaths from heat exhaustion (already 20,000 last year in Europe) will double within a decade. No wonder he says that 'The future has been laid out before us, but the deep eye with which we place ourselves on Earth will not see it' (*Guardian* 12/08/03).

Yet what his passionate demand for reasonable action both acknowledges and sidelines is that rationality alone doesn't address what this 'deep eye' sees. In an argument no less passionate and angry about our current unreason in respect of the environment, Mary Midgley insists that the problem is with 'the myths we live by' – the title of her outstanding book of 2003 on the stories that have created and sustained the contemporary cultural and technological world. She exposes the way in which reason itself has been co-opted into the great modern project of reducing the world to a store of neutral stuff that can be processed by the mind and will. But she also identifies a further complication, which is the behaviourist picture of mind and will: reason has been made to betray itself by means of a reductive account of material reality, and human reality in particular, in which we have a model of thinking and acting that is essentially no more than a description of loosely interlocking functions. Human thinking is a highly successful way of manipulating the environment, setting an agenda for other mechanical processes or functions. We end up with the very odd idea that mental activity is simply that form of material happening (neurons firing and so on) which has the best record in bringing other sorts of material happening into line with it. We have the worst of all worlds, intellectually speaking: an assumption that human mind and will are independent of the material world so that they can impose their wants and needs upon it; and a further assumption that to describe the problem-solving functions of the human brain is to describe thinking in the only way that matters, the only way that is 'scientifically' defensible. She offers some startling examples of the naked presupposition that what 'really' exists is sets of function-patterns which can be reshuffled at will to produce results yet more malleable to manipulation – including the designing and redesigning of humans as well as of other organisms. Programmes build better programmes, which, presumably,

somehow set themselves ever higher 'aspirations' for improvement (i.e. functional economy and rapid delivery of goals). And this is thinkable because of the underlying conviction that mental activity is *essentially* a programme for physical hardware (see, for example, Midgley, *The Myths We Live By*, pp.110-3).

Midgley's discussions are invaluable, not least in the way they lay bare the alarming philosophical nonsenses that prevail in these reductive schemes, where metaphor is habitually confused with argument, and the self-destructive import of what is being claimed seems to escape notice. If this is reason, there is a pretty good case for superstition; or rather, as Midgley suggests, there is more than a case, there is an urgent need for different 'myths', a different set of symbols to organise the world of our experience. In Monbiot's language, the 'deep eye' has to learn to see something new. If we are to find any realism or truth in our engagement with the accelerating crisis of our environment, we need more than reason - or at least, more than reason defined in the professedly neutral way that modernity has sought to understand it. In this lecture, I want first to engage with the challenge to change the myth: Midgley is not very positive about what Christianity can offer here, since she tends to assume that what is normatively Christian is a degree of theological distance about 'nature'; and she (rightly) notes that early modern religion is one of the major contributors to the idea that the fate of nature is for it to be bossed around by a detached sovereign will, whether divine or human. But there is at least one radically different perspective that needs to be retrieved in the Christian repertoire of responses, one that, I shall argue, takes us beyond a generalised respect for the natural order. And on the basis of this, I want to suggest some of the Christian reasons we might have for regarding ecology as essentially a matter of justice for the human as well as the non-human world. From this, I shall move on to considering one or two of the most pressing problems facing us, to see how a different myth relates to the actual choices we must make if we are to have a human future compatible with the will and character of God.

II

First, then, to the 'myth'. The Christian believes that creation exists because God *speaks*: in both Hebrew and Christian Scripture, the Word of God is the foundation of everything. In Eastern Christian thought especially, this theme was developed in some depth, drawing out the implication that creation is itself an act of communication, a form of *language*. Creation is an address, an action that expresses an intelligence and asks for intelligent response. Thus the greatest Greek theologian of the seventh century, Maximus the Confessor, says that every existent reality is a *logos* – a word, an intelligible structure – which carries in a specific way the universal and eternal *logos* in virtue of which everything comes to be, the divine Word spoken of at the beginning of St John's gospel. The further implication is that each existent reality communicates, in and by virtue of the eternal Word, the character of God; and that to respond appropriately to creation is part of responding appropriately to God and indeed of knowing God. Creation itself is an act of

divine self-giving, the bestowing of God's activity in and through what is not God; so for the created intelligence, the world is gift, a means of receiving something of the life of God.

In the words of a recent writer on this Eastern Christian perspective, such a vision 'puts material creation no less than intelligible in an intimate and dynamic relation with God' (Elizabeth Theokritof, 'Embodied Word and New Creation', *Abba: the Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West*, p.223). So to penetrate the workings of the world, to understand its intelligible shape, is to come into contact with a divine action that is reasonable – consistent with itself, accessible in some limited ways to our minds. In the language of Jewish scripture, true thinking, true knowing of the world is becoming aligned with God's wisdom, God's self-consistency in purpose and action, which the Jewish people thought of as a living principle in the universe. But because of this, true thinking is also becoming aligned with the intimate relation of the world in all its variety with God; it is to relate to God by being 'in tune' with the relation of the physical universe to God. If the world manifests the glory and love of God, it is a manifestation that leads to relationship; it is not simply a pattern that we admire, but an ordered life in which we can have a share. And, as the Romanian theologian Dumitru Staniloae has stressed, to understand creation as a gift from God, as something that makes relation with God possible, is also to become able to *make* creation a gift – to receive it from God in blessing and thanksgiving, to offer it back to God by this blessing and gratitude (that is, to let go of the idea that it is just there for our use), and to use it as a means of sharing the divine generosity with others.

Many Eastern Christian writers have emphasised that this picture gives a distinctive vocation to the human person as the one who is specifically and uniquely given a fully intelligible language in which to speak of God's gift and to celebrate it. Humanity, in the Genesis story, names the animals; the calling of the human person is to name the world aright, that is, to acknowledge it as God's gift and to work so as to bring to light its character as reflecting God's character, to manifest its true essence. Thus it is common to describe the vocation of human beings in this context as 'liturgical': human beings orchestrate the reflection of God's glory in the world by clothing material things with sacred meaning and presenting the world before God in prayer. Worship is not only a matter of words, but is a foretaste of the God-related destiny of the world, that longed-for state of creation in which everything can be clearly seen as bearing God's glory and love. And one signal and important aspect of sin is the refusal of human beings to undertake this calling, to refuse to act in a 'priestly' way towards the environment – to refuse to bless and give thanks, to refuse the right use of material things. The great Russian Orthodox theologian, Alexander Schmemmann, goes so far as to suggest that the refusal of this calling is the very heart of original sin, which is the replacement of priestly naming and blessing by the attitude of the consumer, who seeks only to dominate and absorb things in such a way that it becomes impossible to treat them as gift (*Of Water and the Spirit*, p. 96). And in case anyone should think that all this is a somewhat fanciful theological interpretation restricted to the Eastern Christian world of the

Byzantine era, it is worth noting in passing that most serious scholars of Jewish liturgy would now agree that the layout and ritual of the Jerusalem Temple constituted a highly sophisticated representation of a restored paradise, in which the worship of heaven and that of earth were united, a theme which was deeply formative in the earliest Christian worship also.

To put it at its strongest, what this theology claims is that what most deeply and basically *is* is the self-giving action of God; everything that happens to exist, everything that belongs in the interlocking pattern of the intelligible world, is, and is the way it is, in virtue of this underlying reality which is God's giving. This reality is eternal and self-sufficient in the life of God as trinity, as the everlasting exchange of gift between Father, Son and Spirit; but by God's free decision it is also the ground for what is not God. The secret at the heart of all things is gift; and the purpose of God in so giving a share in his action, an 'analogical' echo of his own life, is that what is not God may be suffused with God's joy. The fundamental myth proposed by Christian theology in this tradition is that God's self-forgetting and self-sharing love are what animates every object and structure and situation in the world, and that no response to the world that is not aware of this is either truthful or sustainable.

Theology has to add, of course, that the myth is focused on history, on certain events. Our refusal of priestly responsibility is judged and then reversed by the act of Jesus, in whom God's self-giving is fully at work and who gives his entire identity as a sacrificial gift to the Father so that life and joy may return, so that paradise may be inhabited again. The community of Jesus is a priestly community, as the New Testament makes plain, a community whose rationale is blessing and giving, naming the world correctly and offering it thankfully to God in such a way that offering, giving, becomes the determining feature of relations between human beings as well. When the Christian Church celebrates the presence of its Lord at the Eucharist, it takes the material of the world and gives it to God so that it may become a fully and equally shared meal, a means of *communion* in Christ. The Eucharist manifests the destiny of all material things, which is to be effective signs of an accepting love that uses the material environment to express grace and justice.

III

For the Christian, intelligent, rational action in the world is precisely not the rationality castigated by Mary Midgley; but neither is it simply the self-evident reasonableness longed for by Monbiot. It is the expression of a radical and – we believe – truthful 'myth', the conviction that what we encounter is gift, so that we shall only tell the truth about the world as and when we treat the world accordingly – which means blessing the world as God's self-communication and asking constantly how we use the matter of the world to reflect the underlying and sustaining act of God. This is why for the Christian the connection between ecology and justice is axiomatic; it is no surprise to read in much contemporary writing on ecology that the irresponsible treatment of the environment both reflects and encourages an oppressive politics. To conscript the resources of the natural world into the struggle for

power between humans is nothing new; but what recent decades have made clear is that this process has now reached a point at which the offence against the nature of things is no longer just a matter of moral and theological judgement: it has reached a point at which an offended natural order 'rebels', is no longer able to co-operate with undisciplined human will. The menace of radical climate change with which we began is only one instance; but the effects of irresponsible alteration of the ecology of life-forms in specific habitats (cane-toads in Australia for example) show the same reality. There is a point beyond which the system cannot continue to operate 'normally'.

Economics can manage for only so long as a science that ignores the limits of material resource. A recent commentator from the New Economics Foundation observes that 'To understand anything real about the world economy...we have to understand the condition of its owner, the earth, and its biosphere' (Andrew Simms in *Real World Economic Outlook*, ed. Ann Pettifor, p.60). While economic analysis still refers to environmental factors in economic activity as 'externalities', the problem remains in the developed world generally of a divided consciousness, scientifically aware of but apparently practically blind to issues such as soil degradation, deforestation and a disrupted food chain. The great advances in corporate social responsibility in the business world, welcome as they are, will not of themselves undo the damage caused by our myths of limitless resource and trust in technology to solve consequent problems. Dominant in the whole picture, however, is the addiction to fossil fuel of the wealthy nations; this is what secures the steady continuance of carbon emissions, but it is also what drives anxieties about political hegemony. Since the oil production of relatively stable and prosperous societies is fast diminishing, these countries will become more and more dependent on the production of poorer and less stable nations. How supplies are to be secured at existing levels becomes a grave political and moral question for the wealthier states, and a real destabiliser of international relations. This is a situation with all the ingredients for the most vicious kinds of global conflict – conflict now ever more likely to be intensified by the tensions around religious and cultural questions. And in a world of severely limited supply, it is also clear that for less economically advantaged countries the chances of equal access to fossil fuel supply is negligible, as current DEFRA statistics plainly imply – which has implications for their economic development and the future of their civil society networks. A country engaged in modest industrialisation and the modernisation of health facilities can lose its professional class quite quickly if energy scarcities go beyond a certain level. And even within developed nations, there is the risk that, in a phrase of Ivan Illich (writing more than thirty years ago), high energy consumption will mean that 'social relations must be dictated by technocracy' (quoted by Andrew Simms in the *New Statesman* for June 28th this year). Inequalities of wealth exist within 'wealthy' nations, and it is worth remembering that issues about access and control arise here too, and that the implications for democracy and justice are not always favourable.

One of the features of addictive behaviour is, classically, denial; we should perhaps not be surprised to find the divided mind I spoke of a moment ago in so much of our economic forecasting. But we learn to face and overcome denial partly by new relationships or new security about relationships enabling us to confront unwelcome truths without the fear of being destroyed by them. This is why myths matter, and why multiplying statistics doesn't of itself change things. That the world is the vehicle of 'intimate and dynamic relation' with the active and intelligent source of all life is some sort of spur to face our sins and absurdities in dealing with it. But we need to bear in mind also that we are talking not just about the respectful conservation of an environment for its own sake. Concrete material processes have, so to speak, caught up with the myth, and we should be able to see that offences against our environment are literally not sustainable. The argument about ecology has advanced from concerns about 'conservation': what we now have to confront is that it is also our own 'conservation', our viability as a species, that is finally at stake. And what is more, in the shorter term, what is at stake is our continuance as a species capable of some vision of universal justice. Not the least horror of our present circumstances is the prospect of a world of spiralling inequality and a culture that has learned again to assume what Christianity has struggled to persuade humanity against since its beginning – that most human beings are essentially dispensable, born to die, in Saul Bellow's harsh phrase. I needn't elaborate on how this makes absolute nonsense of any claim to be committed to a gift-based view of the world and of our individual and social relations.

IV

There is in the long run no choice between this spiralling inequality (and the fortress societies it will create) and some realistic step to deal with our addictions. The Global Commons Institute, based in London, has in recent years been advancing a very sophisticated model for pushing us back towards some serious engagement with this matter of equality, through its proposed programme of 'Contraction and Convergence'. This seeks to achieve fairly rapid and fairly substantial reductions in greenhouse gas emissions – but to do so in a way that foregrounds questions of equity between rich and poor nations. At the moment, rates of emission are fantastically uneven across the globe. In the first forty eight hours of 2004, an average American family would have been responsible for as much in the way of emissions as an average Tanzanian family over the entire year. So what is proposed is that each nation is treated as having the same limited 'entitlement to pollute' – an agreed level of carbon emission, compatible with goals for reducing and stabilising overall atmospheric pollution. Since, obviously, heavily industrialised, high-consumption nations will habitually be using a great deal more than their entitlement and poorer nations less, there should be a pro rata charge on the higher users. They would, as it were, be purchasing the pollution 'credits' of less prosperous countries. And this charge would be put at the service of sustainable development in poorer nations in accord with the Millennium Development Goals. This would be treated not as an aid issue but as a matter of trading and entitlement.

The hoped-for effect in the medium term would be *convergence* – that is, a situation in which every citizen of the globe would be steadily approaching the same level of responsibility for environmental pollution. Because such a programme would necessarily challenge over-average users to reduce (otherwise an intolerable tax burden would be imposed), we could look for a reduction in the addictive levels of dependence in wealthier countries and a stimulus to develop renewable energy sources. We should also achieve a dependable source of development income, neither loan nor aid, for the countries suffering most intensely from the existing inequities.

This kind of thinking appears utopian only if we refuse to contemplate the alternatives honestly. Climate change has rightly been described by Sir David King, Chief Scientific Adviser to the Government, as a 'weapon of mass destruction', words echoed by Hans Blix, the former UN weapons inspector. In the current atmosphere of intense anxiety about terrorism, 'rogue states' and long-term political instability, we absolutely cannot afford to neglect what is probably the most deep-rooted source of further and potentially uncontrollable instability in the foreseeable future. We are already aware of the role of fossil fuel supplies in international conflict; we are seeing the beginnings (especially in the Middle East) of tensions around water supplies. 'Somehow we must persuade our dreamselves to confront the end of life as we know it' wrote Monbiot last summer; my main contention here has been simply that fear alone fails to persuade, and that we need to change the dream, the myth, itself. We need a positive vision of the world which compels our love and respect. This is not simply a positive view of human nature. Colin Tudge, at the end of a lengthy and powerfully argued book on the future of food supplies through 'enlightened agriculture' (*So Shall We Reap*, 2003), appeals to the convergent vision of prophetic religion and evolutionary biology, which, he claims, preserves for us a deep intuition about not taking 'too many liberties with our environment' (p.390), so that our humanity is fundamentally 'benign' (391). The point about the convergence of religious and scientific vision is absolutely right, I think, for the reasons already set out – the palpable 'revolt' of the natural order against its distortion by human will. But I still believe that we need that further dimension which insists that the world is simply not understood if it is not seen as related to God.

I have argued elsewhere that the failure of secularism is that it cannot see things clearly in relation to anything other than human needs and perceptions now; the opposite of secularism in this context is not so much a set of systematic religious beliefs as a disposition to be aware of the dimension of unseen relations and connections in and between things and between all things and their source in God, that 'intimate and dynamic' relation evoked by the Greek Fathers. But this means, for the religious believer, that resisting the dominance of secularism is not primarily a political struggle for the rights of religious organisations, but a different sort of political battle – a battle against the reductionism that diminishes both the world and the mind or reason, against the strange versions of human knowledge and labour so scathingly described by Mary Midgely; a battle for the understanding of

matter as the raw material of human justice and solidarity. For the Christian, it is – covertly but crucially - a battle for what Gregory Dix in his book on the liturgy famously called *homo eucharisticus*, that species of human being defined by communion rather than consumption.

Our country is in a remarkably influential place at present, with the chair of the G8 consortium and the Presidency of the European Union in its hands next year. Next year will also see the United Nations Millennium Stock-Take conference, the twentieth anniversary of Live Aid, and – we hope – the beginning of negotiation about what happens when the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012. Is it thinkable that our government can take the lead in pressing the ‘contraction and convergence’ agenda at this significant point? The Prime Minister has already declared that his international priorities for 2005 will include climate change and the future of Africa; contraction and convergence addresses both of these. It seems the moment to look for a new level of public seriousness about environmental issues.

And the Church’s contribution has to consist not primarily or exclusively in public lobbying, though that is important, but in its showing forth of a different myth – the truth of creation’s relation with the creator and especially the role of human work and thought within that. This is what is exhibited every time the Eucharist is celebrated. But this puts a considerable challenge before congregations as well: how easy is it to see in our worshipping practice and our habitual life together both a celebration of God’s communication in what God has made and a process of conversion from the *homo economicus* towards the new humanity which restores blessing and justice to their proper place? A recent and welcome development has been the growth of ‘eco-congregations’, local churches or church groups signing up to a set of environmentally responsible policies for their day to day work as individuals and as communities. But there is still a gap in speech and practice at the level of our institutions as a whole. If we commend contraction and convergence, should the churches undertake an ecological audit of some sort, to contribute to that change in the ‘dreamselves’ that we are advocating? What is really going on in the Christian’s ‘deep eye’?

Dumitru Staniloae described the self-communication of God to humanity as ‘words turned towards the future of mankind’ (*The Tradition of Life*, ed. A.M.Allchin, p. 67). To understand the created order in its relation to God is to see what is possible and imperative for the human future, if human beings are not to be living in prolonged and finally suicidal conflict with the natural order. Yes, this is in a sense an anthropocentric perspective; what other could we intelligibly have, after all? But the centrality of the human in this theology is affirmed only in terms of the human calling to liberate and make sense of an environment which is always engaged in a prior relation with God; the humility that is thus enjoined on us is a constant check to the glorifying of the will. And the news for humanity is both joyful and sobering: there is a possible human future – but it will be costly for us. The question is whether we have the energy and imagination to say no to the non-future, the paralysing dream of endless manipulation, that currently has us captive.