

# Oxford Three Faiths Encounter



## God, Creation and Us: From Theology to Action Conference Transcription

**Thursday 24th March 2022**

**What has gone wrong?**

**Dr. Bethany Sollereeder**

Here is a link showing a graph of global temperatures over the last 65 million years:

[https://www.climate.gov/sites/default/files/styles/full\\_width\\_620\\_original\\_image/public/2023-01/climateqa\\_global\\_surface\\_temps\\_65million\\_years\\_2480.png?itok=KBwxUiYO](https://www.climate.gov/sites/default/files/styles/full_width_620_original_image/public/2023-01/climateqa_global_surface_temps_65million_years_2480.png?itok=KBwxUiYO)

I am not a typical example of a Christian thinker, not representative of any Christian tradition. I describe myself as a charismatic evangelical Anglo-Catholic.

What has gone wrong? My main ideas in this talk can be summarised in two words— anthropomonism and expectations. Anthropomonism may be a new word to you – it is a stronger version of anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism maintains that humans have a central place in world history and the work of God: anthropomonism maintains that humans are the only thing that matters. Anthropocentrism can be positive, promoting human care for the earth, but anthropomonism regards human beings as God’s primary and indeed only concern in creation, overwhelming and overshadowing every other concern. Can you imagine life history continuing without humans? You may be an anthropomonist. Does your idea of heaven only include humans? You may be an anthropomonist. If you think that the 4.1 billion years of life history were just a stepping stone to the last 50,000 years, you may be an anthropomonist.

Christians have varied between an appropriate anthropocentrism and an inappropriate anthropomonism. If you take the example of seeing humans as the priests of creation, it does emphasise the care and self service which is the core of the human task. Humans have particular gifts we can use to knowingly shape the world, including bringing love and mercy to the non-human creation. Yet the priestly model can become anthropomonic when it sets humans as the only mediating presence between God and animals. This would mean that dogs and cats have a lot of contact with God and deep sea squid none. The priestly model goes wrong when it assumes humans have a right to control all other species, and to direct their lives, making a priestly dominion where other creatures are subservient to us.

Stewardship is another popular model drawn typically from the mandates in Genesis 1:26 and 2:15 that humans should be stewards of the land. This is a reasonable interpretation of

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Genesis 2:15 with its command to work the garden, but it too rosy a view of the commands in Chapter 1 about subduing the earth and having dominion over it. Those are violent coercive metaphors drawn from the realms of warfare and slavery and the words used come up in later books about how not to treat your fellow Israelites – don't have dominion over them. But realising the texts that we inherited are not self-evidently environmentalist helps us understand why the complaints of someone like Lynn White Jr do have some merit. He's not wrong when he says that Christian ideologies are responsible for treating the world harshly. We should listen to John MacArthur, a North American mega-church pastor who has the ears of millions through his media Empire. "I have told environmentalists that if they think humanity is wrecking the planet, wait until they see what Jesus does to it. The earth we inhabit is not a permanent planet: it is, frankly, a disposable planet. It's going to have a very short life. It's been around six thousand years or so, that's all, and it may last a few thousand more. And then the Lord is going to destroy it." He's not getting these views from nowhere. Passages like 2 Peter 3:7 – 13 talk about the heavens and the earth being revealed by fire, and this gives him a pretext for saying the world is just there for our use. It is temporary and disposable. This sort of anthropomorphism is easy to dismantle and dismiss, but there is a different kind that is not so easy to spot. I have gestured to it in passing already, and it is this idea that the 4.1 billion years of life on this planet are basically just about us, and this is where I start to diverge quite sharply from most in my tradition, who are used to thinking about history mostly in human terms, which makes us think about centuries or thousands of years but not about hundreds of thousands or millions of years. Once you do, the picture of the world changes rather dramatically.

The second thing that has gone wrong, as I said, is our expectations. You might have assumed I meant that we must be perfectly warm, or jet across the world or eat strawberries all the year round. These are indeed problematic expectations, but I also mean that we expect the world to *stay the same*. Let's look at how the climate has changed over the past 540 million years, the time in which complex life has been on earth. On the chart the line shows the points at which there were no ice caps or glaciers. Our current average temperature is just above 14° Celsius: scientists think post anthropogenic warming will stop at 19° Celsius. From the perspective of this longer period, the earth has spent far more time without polar ice caps than with them. Massive amounts of climate change are part of the perfectly natural course of things. From this perspective, we are in a reasonably cool period, a rare ice house world. Both extremely hot periods like the late Permian and the extremely cold periods, like the asteroid impact winter, resulted in mass extinctions. That too is natural. Scientists estimate that over 99% of all species that have existed have already become extinct. For the last 11,000 years or so, we have had a relatively stable global temperature, and this period is known as the Holocene Era. Over the last half million years

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the average temperature has been about 4<sup>o</sup> Celsius colder than now. So if we had the climate average of this relatively recent past we could not be sitting here in Oxford because all of the UK would be under hundreds of feet of glacial ice. The chart shows when behaviourally modern humans came onto the scene and when anatomically modern humans evolved. So our *expectation* that we live on a planet with a stable climate is simply not true. The stability of the Holocene Era has been the anomaly: planetary climate change has been the norm.

I can hear you say “Bethany, we have changed it. The change is not happening naturally.” Well, species have changed the climate before. The first time was about 2.4 billion years ago when one organism, cyanobacteria, started emitting a highly toxic gas, at amounts that are almost unimaginable. Today, we have increased global CO<sub>2</sub> rates from 240 parts per million to 400 parts per million. This other organism changed the entire atmosphere from 0% of this toxic gas to about 19%. It threatened all life on earth, and plunged the world into its first proper ice age. The toxic gas that the cyanobacteria were emitting was oxygen, which was absolutely toxic for every living creature at the time, and yet the very foundation of life for nearly the entire living world today. That tragedy of unthinking pollution turned into, in Tolkien’s phrase a “eucatastrophe”, a sudden and unexpected turn for the good.

The changes our world are undergoing are already, and will be for a long time in the future, tragedy. It is right to lament those changes. But we can also hold on to this hope: that this change which our collective thoughtlessness, sin and greed has brought on is not going to be the end of life on earth. The vast majority of life on earth is not human or even animal life. By weight there is 35 times more bacteria than all animal life combined. Humans and mammals compose just 0.67 gigatons of carbon, which is 0.03% by weight of life on earth. As Bill Bryson once noted, “Bacteria may not build cities or have interesting social lives, but they will be here when the sun explodes. This is their planet, and we are only on it because they allow us to be.”

In Christian circles, we have been trained to think of humans as the pinnacle of creation the end point of all previous species, and theologically speaking, this is because of two doctrines. First, that humans are made in the image of God, and second because of the incarnation, that God took on human flesh and gave humans an exalted and necessary identity amongst creaturely life. Yet increasingly, Christian scholarship is beginning to question how necessarily anthropomonic those two doctrines really are. Do the image of God and the incarnation indicate theologically that only humans are of value to God’s creative purposes? to put in another way, if humans went extinct is the story of creation over? The work of many (Ruth Page, Dennis Edwards, Jürgen Moltmann, Elizabeth Johnson, Niels Gregersen and many others) argue No. Most of them say humans have a central place, but they have been working on the theological importance of animals and the non-human

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creation to God. One example of this is the concept of deep incarnation, a term coined by Niels Gregersen as an attempt to expand the boundaries of where we see the importance of the identification of the particular life of Jesus of Nazareth with the wider world. So when Christ, the second person of the Trinity, becomes Jesus of Nazareth, we don't see that as only of significance to Jews, or to carpenters, or to men: we see that in God becoming human, all humans are represented by Christ. So humanity as a whole is ennobled by that act of God. Deep incarnation asks—well why stop there? The Gospel of John does not say that God became human and dwelt among us but that God became *σάρξ* (*sarx*), flesh, and dwelt among us. Traditionally we have only bothered to spell out what it means that God became human flesh: “There is neither Jew nor gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, but all are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). But what we have not done is to articulate what it means that God became flesh, that God became mammal, or God became vertebrate, or God became animal, or that God became molecules of carbon, oxygen hydrogen etc. Deep incarnation allows us to see the unity that incarnation offers to all humans, regardless of race and gender, and also to all life, and possibly to all matter.

What could this mean for extreme climate change? It could mean that even if humans and most animals go extinct, which I think is rather unlikely, that the providential purposes of God can be remade and redeemed. The implications of salvation offered through the incarnation are not necessarily limited to the human species. So who is to say that God will not start a new phase of salvation history through the future descendants of the octopus? Or the incredibly intelligent slime moulds?

So if the doctrine of incarnation allows us to think outside of this human only box, what can we say about the image of God? There is not much agreement about what it means to be made in the image of God amongst Christian thinkers. It is tempting to agree with Berkhof's wry observation that “by studying how systematic theologies have poured meaning into Genesis 1:26, one could write a piece of Europe's cultural history.” Theologians have taken whatever central attribute they tend to like best about themselves, and made that the essential characteristic of the image of God—rationality, morality, dominion, sensitivity to God, creativity or even humour. All these have been proposed as what makes us truly human. But recent scholarship has moved away from the search for that singular and essential quality, and instead has focussed either on relational or Christological interpretations of the image of God. And these point either to the unique relationship that God has chosen to have with humans, or to the idea that Christ is the only one who is fully made in the image of God, and the rest of us are made in the image of God insofar as we conform to the likeness of Christ. Both of these interpretations do not suggest any reason as to why the image of God needs to stop at the boundary marker of the human species.

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If we take on board this wider perspective that I am offering, what difference does it make to our response to climate change? To start with, it changes the stakes a little bit. We are not destroying the planet for all life and all time. Even if human and animal life is radically altered, life will go on. It also changes our culpability. Instead of seeing ourselves as those who took a perfectly stable situation and ruined it, we are more like those who at the top of a mountain have inadvertently started an avalanche by being thoughtless. It is true that some have been evil, but most of us have just been trying to provide for our families or eke out a survival in the ways that were open to us. Most people even in developed countries are constrained into unsustainable choices. Let me give two examples. First, did anyone get to this conference without using fossil fuels? I have a few hands going up. Before you say “Yes, I walked here”, did you walk on pavements? Did you walk on shoes that have rubber soles, whose components were shipped around the world three times before they came to us? I am not ruling out that somebody might have shot a wild deer with a hand made bow and stitched their own moccasins with bone needles. Those of you online are also not off the hook: the components of your computer, the infrastructure that gives you electricity, the fibre optic network that connects you, are all made possible by fossil fuels. They are built into pretty much every choice we have and most of those choices that we don’t have. In 2008, MIT did a study that looked at the personal carbon cost of different lifestyles. In order to account for public services such as the building of roads, maintaining things like the military, the police, schools and libraries, they added up all the things that the government did and divided it per capita so that everyone has an even share in the works of the government. The results were pretty shocking. Predictably the average US resident is responsible for 20 metric tons of carbon compared to the world average of 4 tons, but shockingly, a homeless person living on the streets who eats at soup kitchens still had a personal carbon footprint of 8.5 metric tons, more than twice the global average, just by living in the USA. The sustainable amount is considered to be 3 tons [per person per year]. Last week, I spoke to a member of the House of Lords who said that the most up to date information that they are being given is that 60% of emissions in the UK are based on personal choice, but as we saw with the shoes we are often unable to make a choice that does not involve carbon cost. That is similar to our US homeless person who is using 42.5% of the average US citizen’s carbon, so saying 40% is outside of our choice is just about right. Let’s look at the UK today. There are various ways of calculating the average carbon footprint – the lowest is about six [metric tons per person per year]. but that calculation excludes all imports, exports, aviation and shipping, which is a lie the government tells us. It can be calculated up to about 13 tons, but I think a reasonable calculation is 10 tons of carbon per person per year. That means a homeless person in the UK is using 4 tons just by living in the UK. That sustainable amount is 3 tons.

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What has gone wrong? Sustainable living in the UK is a myth. You are defeated even before you start. At least, we are defeated if our goal is to try to keep an unstable planetary climate in a stable place. If we accept that God gave us a world where we have set off forces that are bigger than we can control, but where catastrophe can be changed into eucatastrophe, we may be able to find other measures of success. As the world changes, we can choose to welcome migrants, to take down our legal and physical barriers that prevent those from seeking a basic living from entering our countries. The Hebrew Bible says a great deal about welcoming foreigners and the Christian scriptures add to that. Christians are commanded to show hospitality to strangers, both in Romans and Hebrews, but most especially because Jesus says, “Whatever you do to the least of these, that you do to me.” (Matthew 25:40). Welcoming migrants can even extend to animals and plants. Instead of trying to get a hybrid eco-system, which means a mix of invasive species and back to the historical one, we can actually think about helping animal and plant species migrate as eco-systems change, creating novel eco-systems that concentrate on eco-system function as our measure for success, rather than on historical species composition.

There are any number of things we could talk about beyond this. But I am going to stop there. We have flown through anthropomorphism, our expectations, deep incarnation, the past history of the planet, the image of God, the myth of sustainability, the welcoming of migrants both human and non-human.

### ADDITIONAL SPEAKER NOTES KINDLY PROVIDED BY DR SOLLEREDER

I’m really delighted to be here today. But I’m also apprehensive, in the context of a multi-faith event, lest anyone should mistake me as a representative of typical Christian beliefs. Even within Christian circles, I’m not representative of any major tradition. I’m a charismatic evangelical Anglo-Catholic, of which there are maybe tens, if not twos, of us. So, I will try to make it clear when what I am saying is more typical of the wider Christian tradition, and when what I am saying is my own brand of strange.

What has gone wrong? I think my main ideas on this could be summarised in two words: **anthropomorphism and expectations**.

**Anthropomorphism** may be a new word to you, as it was to me. It is, essentially, a stronger version of the more familiar anthropocentrism. Where anthropocentrism maintains that humans have a central place in world history and the work of God, anthropomorphism maintains that humans are the only thing that matter. While there can be positive types of anthropocentrism that see human care for the earth as a central and

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priestly role, anthropomorphism regards human beings as God's primary concern in creation, basically overwhelming and overshadowing any other concern.

So, you might be an anthropomorphist if you cannot imagine life history continuing without humans. Or if your idea of heaven only includes humans. You might be an anthropomorphist if you think that the 4.1 billions years of life's history on earth were basically just a stepping stone to the last 50,000 years of human history.

Christians have largely varied between an appropriate anthropocentrism and an inappropriate anthropomorphism. Take the example of seeing humans as a priest of creation. This is a pretty common model, used across Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Reformed scholars. In an appropriate way, it can emphasize the care, self-sacrifice, and service that lay at the heart of the human task. It can appropriately emphasise that humans have particular gifts that they can use to knowingly shape the world and to bring God's mercy and love to the non-human creation. Yet, the priestly model can become anthropomorphic when it sets humans as the only mediating presence between God and animals. If you thought that were true, then dogs and cats would have a lot of contact with God, and the deep-sea giant-squid basically none. The priestly model goes wrong when it assumes that humans have a right to control all other species and direct their lives—a sort of priestly dominion where other creatures are subservient to us.

"Stewardship" is another popular model, drawn typically from the mandates in Genesis 1:26 and 2:15 that humans should be stewards of the land. While I think this is a reasonable interpretation of Genesis 2:15 and its command to "work and guard" the land, I think it is far too rosy a view of the commands in chapter 1 about subduing the earth and having dominion over it. Those are pretty violent, coercive metaphors, drawn from the realms of warfare and slavery and the words used of how we should treat the world in Genesis 1 are generally used in the rest of the Hebrew texts as warnings of how fellow Israelites should *not be treated*. "Don't have dominion over them.." But, realising that the texts we've inherited are not self-evidently environmentalist helps understand why the complaints of someone like Lynn White Jr. do have some merit. When he complains that Christian ideologies are responsible for treating the world harshly, he's not really wrong. Listen, for example, to **John MacArthur**, a North American mega-church pastor who has the ear of millions through his media empire:

"I've told environmentalists that if they think humanity is wrecking the planet, wait until they see what Jesus does to it.... The earth we inhabit is not a permanent planet. It is, frankly, a disposable planet--it is going to have a very short life. It's been around six thousand years or so--that's all--and it may last a few thousand more. And then the Lord is

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going to destroy it.”<sup>1</sup> He’s not getting that from nowhere. Rather, passages like **2 Peter 3:7-13** which talk about the heavens and earth being revealed by fire, give him a pretext for saying that the world is basically just there for our use. It is temporary and disposable.

This sort of anthropomorphism is pretty easy to dismantle and dismiss. I want to talk briefly about quite a different kind that is not so easy to spot, and I’ve gestured to it in passing. And it is the idea that the 4.1 billion years of life on this planet are basically just about us. This is where I start to diverge quite sharply from most in my tradition, who I think are used to thinking about history in human terms, but less in geological terms. We think of centuries, and maybe millennia. We don’t tend to think about hundreds of thousands or millions of years. Once you do, the picture changes dramatically.

I said that the second thing that has gone wrong is in terms of our expectations. You might have assumed I meant “we expect to always be perfectly warm or to jet across the world or to eat strawberries all the year round.” I do mean those things to a small degree. But I also mean that we expect the world to stay the same. Let’s look at how the climate has changed **over the last 540 million years**, roughly the time span over which complex life has been on Earth. The dotted line through the middle, a bit below the average, shows the point at which there are no ice caps or glaciers. The gold star with the blue outline shows the current average temperature at just above 14°C, the red star, at around 19°C, indicates where scientists think post-anthropogenic warming will stop. What struck me immediately is that from the perspective of this longer time period the earth is estimated to have spent more time without polar ice caps than it has done with them—so massive amounts of climate change are part of the natural course of things. From this perspective, we are in a reasonably cool period, a rare icehouse world. Both extremely hot periods, like the late Permian just before the bottom of the graph goes purple, and the extremely cold periods, like the KT Impact winter where green turns to orange, resulted in mass extinctions. That too is “natural”. Scientists estimate that 99% of all species that have ever existed have now gone extinct. For the last 11,000 years, however, we have had a relatively stable global temperature. This period is known as the Holocene [**SLIDE**] and you can see it here, with the blue arrow showing the Holocene average that we are used to, and the red arrow showing the average over the last 422,000 years, about 4°C colder than now. In the climate average of the geologically recent past, we could not have been sitting here right now, because all of the UK and most of Northern Europe would have been sitting under hundreds of feet of glacial ice.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gty.org/library/questions/QA131/do-we-have-a-responsibility-to-care-for-the-environment>  
Accessed 23 March 2022.



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To give you a sense of the time scale, **this** is when behaviourally modern humans came on to the scene, and **this** is when anatomically modern humans evolved. So our expectation that we live on a planet with a stable climate is just not true. The stability of the Holocene has been the anomaly, change is the planetary norm.

I can hear you saying, "Ah, but Bethany, we changed it. The change is not happening naturally." Well, species have actually changed the climate before. The first time was 2.4 billion years ago. One organism, cyanobacteria, started emitting a highly toxic gas. Emitting it at amounts that are almost unimaginable. **We have** increased global CO<sub>2</sub> rates from 240 ppm to around 400ppm. This other organism changed the entire atmosphere from 0% of this toxic gas to 19%. It threatened all life on earth and plunged the world into its first proper ice age.

What is the rest of the story? The toxic gas the cyanobacteria were emitting was oxygen. Absolutely toxic for every living creature at that time. The very foundation of life for the nearly the entire living world, all animals and plants, most protists and fungi. That tragedy of unthinking pollution turned into, in Tolkien's phrase, "a euchatastrophe". A sudden and unexpected turn for the good.

The changes our world is undergoing are already and, for a long time, will be tragedy. I could name those tragedies, but as you have already decided to come to a conference on lamenting climate change, I suspect you already know them. It is right to lament, but we can also hold onto this hope: this change which our collective thoughtlessness, sin, greed... has brought on will not be the end of life on earth. Because **[SLIDE]** the vast majority of life on earth is not human, or even animal. By weight, there is 35x more bacteria that there is of all animal life combined. Humans and mammals compose just 0.067 Gigatons of carbon, or 0.03% of the 545 gigatons of carbon life on earth. As Bill Bryson once noted, "Bacteria may not build cities or have interesting social lives, but they will be here when the Sun explodes. This is their planet, and we are on it only because they allow us to be."<sup>2</sup>

In Christian circles, we have been trained to think of humans as the pinnacle of creation, the end point of all previous species. Theologically speaking this is in particular because of two doctrines: first, that humans are made in the image of God, and second because of the Incarnation: that God took on human flesh gives humans an exalted, and necessary, identity amongst creaturely life. Yet, increasingly, scholarship is beginning to question how necessarily anthropomonic those two doctrines really are. Do the image of God and the Incarnation indicate theologically that only humans are of value to God's creative purposes? If humans go extinct, is the story of creation over?

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<sup>2</sup> Bill Bryson, **A short history of nearly everything**

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The work of Ruth Page, Denis Edwards, Jurgen Moltmann, Holmes Rolston, Elizabeth Johnson, Niels Gregersen and many others would argue "no". While most of these authors (Ruth Page might be an exception) would defend that humans have a uniquely important place in world history, they are anthropocentric, they have been working on the theological importance of animals and the non-human creation to God. One example of this is the concept of "Deep Incarnation", [SLIDE] coined by Niels Gregersen. Deep Incarnation is an attempt to expand the boundaries of where we see the importance of the identification of the particular life of Jesus of Nazareth with the wider world. So, when Christ, the second person of the Trinity, became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, we don't see that as only of significance to Jews, or to carpenters, or to men. In God becoming human, all humans are represented by Christ. Humanity as a whole is ennobled by that act of God. Deep Incarnation asks: "Why stop there? The Gospel of John does not say 'God became *human* and dwelt amongst us' but 'God became *sarx*', God became flesh and dwelt among us<sup>1</sup>." Traditionally, we've only bothered to spell out what it means that God became human flesh: that there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, but all are one in Christ Jesus. What we have not done is to fully articulate what it means that God became flesh: that God became mammal, or God became cordate, or God became animal. Or, if you really want to stretch it, God became molecules of carbon, oxygen, hydrogen, etc. Deep Incarnation allows us to see the unity that the Incarnation offers not only to all humans regardless of race or gender, but also to all life, and even possibly all matter.

What could this mean for extreme climate change? It could mean that even if humans and most animals go extinct (which is rather unlikely), that the providential purposes of God can be remade and redeemed—the implications of salvation offered through the incarnation are not limited to the human species. Who is to say that God will not start a new phase of salvation history through the future descendants of the octopus? Or of the remarkably intelligent slime-mould? If the doctrine of the incarnation allows us to think outside of human-only box, what can we say about the image of God?

[SLIDE], There is not much agreement on what it means to be made in the image of God in the first place. It is tempting to agree with Berkhof's wry observation that "by studying how systematic theologies have poured meaning into Gen.1:26, one could write a piece of Europe's cultural history."<sup>3</sup> Exegetes seem to have largely taken whatever supposedly essential attribute they liked best about themselves and decided that is what the image of God meant. Rationality, morality, dominion, sensitivity to God, creativity, and

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<sup>3</sup> Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith, Revised*, trans. by Sierd Woudstra (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 184. Also quoted in John Douglas Hall, *Imaging God*, 91.

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so on, have all been proposed as what makes us “truly human”. Recent scholarship, however, has moved away from the search for that singular and essential quality. Instead, scholars have focused on relational or Christological interpretations of the *imago Dei*. These point either to the unique relationship God has *chosen* to have with humans, or to the idea that Christ is the *only one* made fully in the image of God: the rest of us are made in the image of God insofar as we are conformed to the likeness of Christ. Both of these interpretations do not suggest any reason for why the image of God needs to stop at the boundary marker of the human species.

Think of the Christological interpretation: humans are in the image of God in so far as they are conformed to Christ. There is no need to stop at the human species. In so far as the giant squid or its descendants can be conformed to the likeness of Christ, they too, could be considered to be made in the image of God if God so called them.

The story of God's creation did not begin with humans, so there is no necessary reason to believe that it will end with humans either, nor necessarily be limited to this planet. Creation, far from being a static description of something that happened in the prehistoric past, describes God's ongoing work with the world. God is creating everyday: new possibilities, new relationships, new redemptions.

If we take on board the perspective I'm suggesting, what difference does it make to our response to climate change? Well, to start, it changes the stakes a bit. We are not destroying the planet for all life and all time. Even if human and animal life is radically altered, life will go on. It also changes our culpability. Instead of seeing ourselves as those who took a perfectly stable situation and ruined it, we are more like those who at the top of a mountain have inadvertently started an avalanche by being thoughtless. Some have been evil, true. But most of us have just been trying to provide for our families and eke out a survival in the ways that were open to us. Most people, even in developed countries are constrained into unsustainable choices. Let me give two examples: did anyone get to this conference without the use of fossil fuels? Before you confidently say: “I did, I walked here”, let me ask—did you walk on pavements? With shoes with rubber soles? Shoes whose materials were shipped around the world three times before being assembled, and then shipped here? (I'm not ruling out that somebody shot a wild deer with a handmade yew bow and stitched their own moccasins with bone needles... anyone?) Those online, the components of your computer, the infrastructure that gives electricity and the fiberoptic network that you connects you... all made possible by fossil fuels. Fossil fuels are built into nearly every choice we have, and many we do not.

In 2008, MIT did a study where they looked at the personal carbon cost of different lifestyles. In order to account for public services (building those roads, maintaining things like military, police, schools, libraries) they simply added up all that the government did and

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then divided it per capita, so everyone had “an even share” in the works of the government. The results were **pretty shocking**.

Predictably, the average US resident was high—20 metric tons of carbon compared to the world average of 4 tons. *Shockingly*, a homeless person who lives on the street and eats at soup kitchens still had a personal carbon footprint of 8.5 metric tons—more than twice the global average. 3 tons, by the way, is considered the sustainable amount. Last week I spoke with a member of the House of Lords who said the most up to date information they are given is that 60% of emissions in the UK came down to personal choice—though, as with the shoes, we are often unable to make a choice that does not involve carbon costs. So that’s similar to the US situation here: the homeless person is using 42.5% of the average citizen’s carbon, so 40% outside our personal choice is about right.

Now, let’s look at the UK today. The average carbon footprint has variable ways of being calculated, from 6 tonnes, which excludes all imports/exports, aviation and shipping, up to a maximum of 13 tonnes which includes everything. A reasonable calculation is **10 tonnes of carbon per person per year**.<sup>4</sup> So, a homeless person here would use 4 tonnes. The sustainable amount is 3 tonnes.

What has gone wrong? Sustainable living in the UK is a myth. You are defeated before you start.

At least, we are defeated if our goal is to try to keep an unstable planetary climate in a stable place. If we accept that God gave us a world where we have set off forces that are bigger than we can control, but where catastrophe can be changed into euchatastrophe, we can find other measures of success.

As the world changes, we can choose to **welcome migrants**. To take down our legal and physical barriers that prevent those from seeking a basic living from entering our countries. The Hebrew Bible says a great deal about welcoming foreigners, and the Christian scriptures add to that: Christians are commanded to show hospitality to strangers in Romans and Hebrews, but most especially because Jesus says: “whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me.”

Welcoming migrants even extends to animals and plants! **Instead of trying to** get a hybrid ecosystem back to a historical one, we can help animal and plant species migrate, creating novel ecosystems that concentrate on ecosystem function as our measure of success rather than on historical species composition.

There are any **number of things** we can talk about beyond this, but I’m going to stop there. We’ve flown through anthropomorphism, our expectations about climate, deep incarnation, the image of God, the myth of sustainability, and the welcoming of migrants

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.carbonindependent.org/23.html> 23 March 2022

# Oxford Three Faiths Encounter



## God, Creation and Us: From Theology to Action Conference Transcription

both human and non-human. So thank you for sticking with me through a rather wild ride and there will be time for questions after lunch.