

Oxford Three Faiths Encounter



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

**FRIDAY 25 March 2022 9.30am
BIODIVERSITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE**

**Sustainable Development
Revd Margot Hodson**

and Q and A with Revd Margot Hodson and Dr Martin Hodson

Introduction

In the previous talk we heard about planetary boundaries and environmental processes that are going out of control in our world. What I'm wanting to do is put alongside that, something about sustainable development; how we can work that together and hopefully how we can see some practical steps forward. Sustainable development puts together issues to do with the environment, and the politics that could drive a response in a positive direction and combines this with understanding how we respond to human needs looking at poverty wealth and well-being. Looking at the history, it first became defined as a term way back in 1983. At that time a lot of other terms were defined (such as biodiversity). The Brundtland Commission (1983) defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own need.", which is a very positive statement for humans. The weakness of it is that it's very anthropocentric in the way it's framed. This statement is really good in terms of looking at future generations and possibly not so good in looking at the environment. As we look at how sustainable development is now defined, it takes the three areas of social, environmental and economic concerns and sees how they can be put together more holistically to build a sustainable world. That's defined as the process of balancing the needs of humans and their economic and social development with the need to protect the natural and the built environment so that these needs can be met not only in the present but in the indefinite future.

1992 Rio Summit

Policy for sustainable development was taken forward in 1992 at the Rio Summit, which was a major landmark conference and for the first time uncovered for a wider audience the scale of the environmental problems that we are seeing alongside some of the human problems that people were more aware of. Five things came out of this summit

© Speaker copyright, all rights reserved. You may print this download for personal use, but no further copy or distribution is allowed without permission from the speaker(s).

Oxford Three Faiths Encounter



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

- The Convention on Biological Diversity;
- The Framework Convention on Climate Change;
- Principles of Forest Management;
- The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development; and
- Agenda 21.

The first two are continuing to this day they set up what are called the conference of the parties of COPS. I'll do the second one first as that's the one you will know about the framework convention on climate change. And those COPS have been going on an ongoing way ever since 1992, they've been gathering prominence even in the popular media and the last one we had of those is the COP 26 in Glasgow.

So that's where those climate change global conferences have come from. The first one though, has been going on the same trajectory has far fewer and is much less high profile and that's the biological diversity COPS and the last one of those was in October which I think was number fifteen and so they haven't had as many, they don't get as much press profile. Some people say should they be put together and I think the worry of that is that the biodiversity might get subsumed in the climate. I think it's good to have both and I think we need to put an emphasis on the biological diversity alongside the climate change. And then, alongside that there was a principals of forest management – a declaration on environment and development and agenda 21 which if any of us were around in this area round about the turn of the century, that was a very big kind of agenda 21 it seemed to be everywhere at that point. So, they were the outcomes of Rio.

Millennium Development Goals

From that starting point a set of goals were developed for the new millennium, known as the Millennium Development Goals These were goals that were set for the first fifteen years of this century. There were eight goals for development and they were eradicating hunger, universal primary education, gender equality, reducing child mortality, maternal health, combatting some of the serious diseases particularly AIDS and malaria, looking at environmental sustainability and global partnership for development. These were really good aims, but you'll notice just one of those is an environmental aim. These aims took us through the first fifteen years of this century and did take some of these issues forward. There was good news: in 2013, there was a report published that had been assessing how these goals were doing, coming up to the fifteen years when they would end and need resetting for the next stage. The number of people who had been in extreme poverty had been more than halved. Less people were hungry and malnourished, more people had access to safe drinking water and a lot of those big diseases, particularly malaria, TB and AIDS were under control.

© Speaker copyright, all rights reserved. You may print this download for personal use, but no further copy or distribution is allowed without permission from the speaker(s).

Oxford Three Faiths Encounter



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

But a lot of the other ones were less on target, particularly child survival, infant death and maternal deaths and education. Those were not on target.

Perhaps the really bad news when they reviewed the millennium goals was the environmental goal, because this was severely off target. The growth of carbon emissions was massively higher than in 1990's levels. The aim from Rio for forestry had been trashed and forest loss was enormous. There was massive overexploitation of marine fish stocks, which were threatening a collapse of those fish stocks. In terms of land and marine areas for biodiversity protection there was protection but many birds, mammals, and other species are heading for extinction at a much faster rate with declines in population distribution. Remember those graphs that Martin showed of wild populations.

So, although it looked like everything was going well on many of those goals, with this environmental goal it was going badly wrong. It had gone so badly wrong that it was threatening all of the other goals because you can't progress human well-being if you haven't got a planet to live on. That was the huge wakeup call in assessing the millennium goals. Meanwhile, alongside all of this development work that was going on in research there was a number of scientific things going on in the environmental sphere. These things began to come together – one which Martin introduced has to you already the Planetary Boundaries and they came out in 2009 initially and again in 2015. Those began to explain why that environmental goal was so off target.

Economic measures of ecosystems

To explain to people living in a very economic business world why we need to care for nature is not simply that it might be pretty but that it's actually very, very important. To gain a response often requires more pragmatic and utilitarian models of action. Ecosystem services looks at an ecosystem in terms of what it does, what it provides, and the economic benefits of healthy ecosystems. It is a way of really explaining ecosystems to business people and politicians, who might not otherwise understand them, and might not be interested in the science of them. Instead, they are interested in what service they provide and why we need them. This enables them to assess how we get value out of them and why it's important to sustain them in the long term.

Out of that has come something called TEEB - The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity. Their strapline is 'making nature's values visible', and they go for putting financial value on nature. Again as an environmental ethicist I have huge qualms over this because I think we should value nature for its own intrinsic value, but we're living in a world

© Speaker copyright, all rights reserved. You may print this download for personal use, but no further copy or distribution is allowed without permission from the speaker(s).

Oxford Three Faiths Encounter



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

where, if something doesn't have a price on it, it's not seen as valuable. Whereas if you put a price on it, it does make a difference.

A good example of that is to do with mangroves which grow around tropical seas, along the coastline, a lot of low latitude areas. They're good for biodiversity but also to protect the coastline from storms. But they're in shallow, warm seas that are just perfect for shrimp farming. You may have a very poor population or you have a multinational company that thinks, 'Well, if we didn't have mangroves in that part of the world, we could be farming shrimp there and that could make money for local people, or make money for our company'.. So, they take out the mangroves and put in shrimp farming and that can be very lucrative. . That's all very well until you get some of these major cyclones, what Martin was talking about, those big storms coming in or you get a tsunami which comes from an earthquake from within the ocean, and you then have nothing to protect your coast. You get massive coastal flooding and the local communities based alongside the coastline are heavily damaged. The farmland along the coastline gets major saline intrusion where and the saltwater makes the soil useless. Then you think let's build a sea wall. But the cost of building an effective sea wall is a hundred times the revenue from the shrimp farming. It would take five hundred years of shrimp farming to earn the cost of that sea wall by which time you would probably need another one. And so, what was the point of grabbing those hugely valuable mangroves that were protecting your coast for a revenue which in comparison, is very small? (See Tony Juniper, 'What Has Nature Ever Done for Us?: How Money Really Does Grow On Trees', London: Profile Books, 2013). If we put a financial value on things, it feels wrong as an environmentalist and ethicist but it is a pragmatic way of saying this is why we need to care for nature. TEEB and Ecosystem Services have contributed to a shifting understanding of how we balance human and environmental concerns and this led to a shift in the next phase of the Development Goals.

The Sustainable Development Goals

In 2015 a new set of goals were set. These are called the Sustainable Development Goals and run until 2030. There are seventeen of them and they have been critiqued because there are so many of them but they show more accurately the sheer scope of what we have got to do and they are great goals. Whereas the millennium goals were aimed at lower income countries; mainly in the global South, the Sustainable Development Goals are global. So every single country including this one should be committed to the sustainable development goals. If you want something to write to your MP about, ask them what they are doing about the Sustainable Development Goals, because we should have a central focus on them in our society, and in our government.

© Speaker copyright, all rights reserved. You may print this download for personal use, but no further copy or distribution is allowed without permission from the speaker(s).

Oxford Three Faiths Encounter



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

There are seven goals for environment which is more realistic. They are much more specific, much more focused on different things to do with making the environment sustainable, and to do with the relationship between the natural world and humans. They are much more, focused in how we respond to that the challenges. Goal number seventeen is a partnership of goals and there are nine human goals. Among these are The original Millennium Development Goals.

Doughnut Economics

We are now about halfway through the fifteen years for the Sustainable Development Goals and we've got a huge amount to do on them. Martin talked to you about the Planetary Boundaries – is there a way of putting all of this together? I'm sure some of you will have heard of an Oxford economist called Kate Raworth and she has very cleverly put together a scheme by which you can put the Sustainable Development Goals together with Planetary Boundaries. What she has done is she has taken the nine human goals and used them to create a social foundation. [shows diagram] This is the base level needed to have human well-being globally. If we attained this it would provide a basic level of living for everybody, wherever they are in the world, wherever they are in society. That would be the social foundation. Then Raworth has taken the environmental Sustainable Development Goals and the Planetary Boundaries to create an outer circle [on diagram] as an ecological ceiling, which we must not transgress if we are to keep a healthy planet that is liveable for humans. . . Sadly, of the Planetary Boundaries, four have been transgressed already.

Within the ecological ceiling and the social foundation you have the sweet spot of the doughnut within which we can live. This is the safe and just space for humanity. The question is 'how do we get to be within that sweet spot'? Kate concludes that there are four things: first, we should have less focus on GDP growth. It is the focus on economic growth that has skewed our life on the planet in a negative way. She says we should have less focus on the individual and more focus on community. She says we need to have redistributed economics which means to find non coercive and collaborative ways to reduce the huge gulf between the very rich and the very poor. It is in everyone's interest to bring economics towards a more central level, so you bring the poorest up to a basic level of well-being, and you somehow moderate the very wealthy ones who are taking tourist trips to the moon. Somehow we need to bring everyone back to a sensible middle level. Fourthly Raworth recommends regenerative economics which is a cradle to cradle style of production rather than cradle to grave so everything should be recycled, and everything, when it is produced, should have a means of what happens to it at the end of its life in that form, so that it can be recycled into something else. Those are Kate's economics and some people might feel that

© Speaker copyright, all rights reserved. You may print this download for personal use, but no further copy or distribution is allowed without permission from the speaker(s).

Oxford Three Faiths Encounter



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

that's rather idealistic, and a classic left of centre view, but actually that's not the only person who's been saying those things.

The Dasgupta Review

In 2021, the British government commissioned what's been called The Dasgupta Review, which came to very similar conclusions starting from a very different place. Professor Sir Partha Dasgupta said that our economies, livelihood and wellbeing all depend on our most pressured asset, nature, and we are part of nature and not separate from it. Misunderstanding our relationship to nature was one of the key issues that has caused the environmental crisis. We have seen ourselves as separate from nature, not realised we are a part of it.

To detach nature from economic reasoning is to imply that we consider ourselves to be external from nature. The fault is not in economics, it lies in the way we've chosen to practice it, and the environment has been an externality in economics since the 1930s, since it really developed as a discipline, and that needs to be dealt with. Nature is a "blind spot" in economics. We can no longer afford for it to be absent from accounting systems that dictate national finances or ignored by economic decision makers. He says transformative change is possible – we and our descendants deserve nothing less.

The Mark Carney Reith Lectures

Then a third person who's saying similar things to this is of course Mark Carney. I don't know how many of you were able to hear the Reith Lectures last year, ("How We Get What We Value," Mark Carney, Reith Lectures, 2020). Carney was very clear that this is the way we should go to do something about this situation.

Conclusion

So Martin has shown you the Planetary Boundaries and I hope I have given you an idea of what we can do with Doughnut Economics. Before I explain what I want to ask you to do next I'd like to ask those who are on Zoom if they have a phone with them to photograph the screen I'm going to stop screen sharing now. Just for five minutes, we're going to have questions and close, so what I'd like you to do is with the one or two people next to you just to talk about what would Doughnut Economics look like in your community and your community might be your faith community it might be your local area your village your local street your city you might want to think about the nation what would donut economics look like in your committee.

[1:14]

BREAK

© Speaker copyright, all rights reserved. You may print this download for personal use, but no further copy or distribution is allowed without permission from the speaker(s).

Oxford Three Faiths Encounter



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

Q & A with Martin and Margot Hodson

Q: [question unclear]

Martin: Was it about the degrowth movement?

Q: Yes

Martin: I think, personally, we almost certainly need to be going that way for sure. It isn't something politicians like - you know you won't get any of the political parties apart from the Green Party saying they're going to be doing that. Now where would Kate Raworth sit on the degrowth spectrum? I think she would be sitting somewhere along it but perhaps not one of the more extreme people at the end of it. From what I've read of her work that would be the situation. But at the moment we're not going to see a lot of politicians going with degrowth, unfortunately. I think it's going to have to come from the people.

Q: Faith groups maybe.

Martin: Yes.

Q: [unclear] Living in the North and the realities there. For me it's partly a global community. How do we start to create a conversation about the global community that isn't about fighting one another – where we can tell the truth about what is happening but it is not about blame?

Margot: How to build a global community that isn't based on conflict but is based on conversation and being able to explain the truth to people so that we can take action. People in the West think they are doing a good thing by giving their clothes away to other parts of the world, but then they get dumped on the low-income countries and that can really damage a lot of local industry and the clothing industry there so how can we actually rethink things to make things equitable and to do that in a collaborative way. I know the Archbishop has been doing some work on that within the Christian frame, within the Anglican frame. He described it as 'finding the mind of Christ' – how can we do things together as community that is a harmonious one? Where we do things together. And that could work in many religions as well.

Q: [unclear]

© Speaker copyright, all rights reserved. You may print this download for personal use, but no further copy or distribution is allowed without permission from the speaker(s).

Oxford Three Faiths Encounter



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

Margot: I'll explain it – the fact that the economic muddle is very utilitarian, it is very quantitative in the way that it's framed. We need something that is based more on qualitative values and wellbeing. And how do we get to that stage? I think to actually move society, because it is that economic quantitative based, there needs to be that. But we want to be aware of what we are doing when we use things like TEEB. And Ecosystem Services. And to try and guide towards a more deontological, qualitative, holistic way.

Q: Can I add to that? Economics isn't the problem, it's the way we use it. The whole point of economics is scarcity, which creates this fear which makes the West hold onto all its resources.

There is this huge feeling of lack. And we need to change it on a really basic level.

Margot: I think I agree with you on that.

Q: [unclear] it can be traumatic, but we have shown with Covid that it can be done. Has there been any research on the transition from where we are now, and what does that look like?

Margot: I think sometimes it's a paradigm shift, as with the pandemic; it all happened very quickly. To some extent we have to transition to a different model and actually that is a difficult thing and that's where we need to be focused.

Martin: It's fairly recent stuff they're doing a lot of work on it. There are one to two cities that have actually adopted this like Amsterdam. But I think it's still sort of being worked out.