

Oxford Three Faiths Encounter



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

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What has gone wrong?

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This version of the transcript has not been edited by the speaker.

I came across a kabbalistic interpretation of what we normally think of as two trees at the centre of the garden of Eden, the tree of life, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. They seem like two distinct trees, as shown by God banning them lest they eat from the tree of life. But in kabbalistic thought, they are the same tree, so that the presence of knowledge means a more profound grasp of life, and that encompasses the life of all beings, because the source of all life is God. The sin of Adam and Eve is then understood as a separation of the tree of knowledge from the tree of life: so the function of knowledge is not the enhancement of life but knowledge becomes power and control.

I came across similar ideas in the work of the Oxford theologian Dr Jeremy Nadler (?) in a collection of papers on harmony. In the 16th century, with writers like Francis Bacon, the function of knowledge changes from knowing in order to appreciate creation to knowing in order to control creation.

The biblical verb “to know” describes intimacy of various kinds, as in “Adam knew his wife Eve”, but this intimacy need not be carnal. The children of Israel cry out to God from their slavery, at the beginning of the book of Exodus, just before God is revealed to Moses at the burning bush – “God knew”, and this normally transitive verb carries no object there, as if knowledge is empathy, as if it is a process of understanding and caring, rather than an act of the mind alone. We can relate this to two other verbs, as Adam and Eve are put into the garden *l’ovdah ul’shomrah*, to work it and to keep it. That is the usual translation, but the biblical scholar Ellen Davis in her book *Scripture Culture and Agriculture* enlarges the meaning of these terms. She notes that *Avodah* work really means “service”. In rabbinic interpretation *Avodah*, service in the Temple, comes to mean “service of the heart” ie prayer. So what we are really told here is to have a reverential attitude towards the land, and she notes also that the verb *keep* is usually used with regard to God’s commandments. We must have reverence to the land entrusted to us by God for the sake of all species. That brings the notion of knowledge, service and reverence together into a sense of closeness,

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empathy and concern for all creation. It is a counterforce to the notion of anthropocentrism and a call to how we use all our gifts of intellect and compassion in relation to the rest of life.

Maimonides enquires into the meaning of the love of God and the awe of God in chapter 2 of his “Laws of the Foundation of Torah.” He says that the love of God is when one takes a step out into the wonder of the world and seeks to understand it better in order to know God. The awe of God is like the other step in the dance, the step you take back, saying “How small am I before all this magnificence!” It seems to me there is something very important in the re-prioritisation of how we relate to the world in terms of understanding and knowledge. What is its purpose? It is to have cognition, empathy and wonder with the whole of creation, not to control it. This is Genesis 2 over Genesis 1, as Bethany you rightly said, one tries to remove the colonialism from it.

My second theme is commodification and monetisation. The first major colonialist in the Bible is Pharaoh. The rabbinic choice of the prophetic reading to set against the narrative of the ten plagues is from Ezekiel, in which Ezekiel puts into Pharaoh’s mouth “It’s my river, and I made it.” In other words, the claim of human ownership over the natural good and the natural world – so it is not surprising that Pharaoh is among the first to enslave. It was very chastening to hear you Bethany talk about the rubber on the feet of our shoes and how many times that has gone around the world, and how many people and how much resources have been involved in that. Some of where we have arrived at in our relationship to the things of this world is the attitude that it is “mine” – in the ancient slave trade, though still continuing. But the trade in humans, though officially stopped, heralds the trade in commodities. We do not sell the bodies of the people, at least we think we don’t, but we sell the things that make those bodies able to thrive like the goods of the land, the natural resources, and we do not make recompense either to the people who produce them, because the hardest deal struck wins, so that it is very doubtful that we can possibly be paying a due price for what we constantly import and use; and we certainly don’t consider the debt to the very soil and all its organisms that produce the goods that we seek to buy as part of their costs. And so we live in this legacy of the slave trade which seems to me to have undergone modification, but not an adequate rethinking. And when we go to the supermarket, as I do I wonder what would happen if there was a short video as soon as I touched a tin of something which showed me what has gone into its production, who has worked at it, what the energy costs are, what the costs to the earth are – what would I buy? To live sustainably is impossible: that is definitely true, but it may well be possible to live less brutally unsustainably, and less immorally. “Climate justice” was a key term at Cop 26, and it has to be a key word for the future, coming into its full force. We are living really in an age of climate imperialism and climate colonialism which is very hard to justify morally. At

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the heart of the thinking is not just a modification of consumer culture but a real reconsideration of consumer culture and what it leaves in its wake. It made me think of the most important rabbinic teaching on money and wealth, Pirke Avot 5:13 – There are four attitudes to money.

1. The person who says, "What is mine is mine and what is yours is yours"--this is the average person.. 2. The person who says, "What is mine is yours and what is yours is mine"-- is ignorant. 3. The person who says, "What is mine is yours and what is yours is your own"-- this is a saintly person. 4. And the person who says, "What is yours is mine, and what is mine is mine"--this is a wicked person. But there is a modification to the first position which says that although this sounds just, it is "the way of Sodom", because it says "I have the right because I can pay, so it is legally mine. But is it morally mine, is it ethically mine? Is the implication that because you have incomparably less, what's yours is yours because you deserve it, and what's mine is mine because I deserve it? The notion that that is the way of Sodom is very challenging.

So my first theme was about the way we use mind and conscience and the second part about our attitudes to other life and our subjugation of it.

My third theme is disconnection. Both of my first two challenges are magnified by our disconnection from the earth. I'll go back to Ellen Davis' wonderful book. It is very clear reading that, if one needed to be reminded, that the world of the Hebrew Bible and after that the world of the sages of the period of the Mishnah up to the year 200, and indeed the world of the Talmud taking us up to late antiquity – these are all worlds intimately connected with land. Here are people who know the nature of soil; they understand the implications of drought and flood, of insects and locusts, the dangers they represent and the blessings they bring. The birds and mammals of the landscape are named not as kinds of exotic species but because people who lived among them understand them and know their habits and there is something magnificent about that wholeness of the picture of the world. But we as Jews have become disassociated very largely from land. It is connected with a very long history of exile. Some of that has been reversed through a connection with land in Israel, but much of it remains the case, and for urban populations of the world today we lack that connection. We are not aware of the relationship to land of what we are doing. Some years ago I was at a conference in Oxford arranged by Colin Tudge, on "real farming." He arranged a side seminar on "Spirituality, Ethics and Land Ownership." He thought they would be very few people there, but the room was packed with people who saw land as a spiritual responsibility. This desire to reconnect is extremely important – unless we reconnect there will be further generations removed from what it is we are doing to the earth. I'll conclude with a reference to an obscure biblical Temple practice, which is the offering of Me'ilah. Me'ilah is the misappropriation of sacred property. If you use something

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dedicated to the Temple unwittingly, you have to bring an offering, pay back and add on a fifth. It hasn't been done since the Second Temple was destroyed in the year 70 of our era. But in an interesting Talmudic practice, it is turned into a metaphor, and it says that someone who benefits from the goods of this world without saying a blessing is as if they have committed this sin of misappropriation. That goes to the heart of our lack of relationship with land, soil and nature, which is the sacred. If we use it without due recognition of what it is, and its sanctity, then there is something wrong. We are misappropriating it.

Where does this take us? I want to hear what Kamran will say. For what human striving is worth, we need to rethink what knowledge is for; we need to reconsider the whole process of consumption and we need to reintegrate human life with a life from the soil and its elements upwards towards a much more holistic understanding of what we are doing living here on earth.

I have a caution and anxiety around the word "lament." I am a very keen gardener and I look out the window and I can see how the climate has changed. Things go yellow at times they used not to go yellow with drought when I was a child, and I lament and it hurts, and I look out for the familiar birds, and if they are not there, something aches in my guts, but the other bit of me says "Don't lament yet. Do your best to fight for life."