The Pope’s Climate Change Revolution

The Encyclical on Environment

Prof Geoff Hunt

This summer Pope Francis will launch his encyclical on climate change and the environment. Addressing 1.2 billion members of the Roman Catholic Church, 400,000 priests, world leaders, international agencies, scientists and technology developers and, indeed, every human being on the planet, it cannot but be revolutionary. It will be carefully balanced, scientifically sound, and very direct. A repeated phrase of Pope Francis recently has been “If we destroy Creation... Creation will destroy us.”

The encyclical – the first of this Pope’s incumbency – will create a firm moral foundation for the landmark environmental gatherings that follow this year. He will address the joint session of U.S. Congress in September, then address the United Nations General Assembly in New York, and finally get his message across at the game-changing U.N. Climate Conference in Paris in December.

Global justice

The ethical thrust of the Pope’s message is that humanity and the whole web of life face a grave threat which humans are responsible for, and humans are responsible for rectifying the situation. No doubt he will emphasize the global injustice that the poorest people are least responsible for climate change but are, and will be increasingly, most affected by it.

As Jeff Nesbitt, the National Science Foundation’s director of legislative and public affairs in the Bush and Obama administrations, says: “That sort of all-across-the-world public awareness around a threat (one that isn’t the result of military conflicts between nation states) has never truly happened before in our history as a species on Earth, but it’s happening now.”

Climate change and technologies

Climate change has been caused by human use of now outdated ‘dirty technologies’, using fossil fuels (oil, coal, gas) as the energy source. Emissions of carbon dioxide and methane in particular have thickened the atmospheric blanket around the Earth, trapping the sun’s heat. The gradual rise in heat damages eco-systems, causes drought, floods, soil erosion, sea level rise, and stronger hurricanes and storms. This poses an escalating threat to coastal mega-cities and undermines agricultural capacity.

While the old technologies were implicated in the planetary damage, new emerging technologies such as nanomaterials, solar and wind energy will help a transition to a low-carbon economy. Other new technologies that have emerged in the last decade – including super-computers and telecommunications – can now measure and transmit knowledge of the damaging impacts with greater predictability and accuracy than ever before. However, technology alone can achieve nothing. It can have an effect only if the moral and political will can be generated. Pope Francis is playing a huge part in generating this will.

An alliance for action?

People of all faiths and none will have to come together, as they are now beginning to do, in order to really rise to the global challenge of climate change. For statements on climate change by all religions, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism, go to the Yale University website: ‘Forum on Religion and Ecology’ (http://ore.yale.edu/publications/statements/).

Further reading

- Pledge: In the USA the organisation Catholic Climate Covenant has launched a ‘St Francis Pledge to Care for Creation’, http://catholicclimatecovenant.org
- Earth Day was on 22nd April 2015: http://www.earthday.org/

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Three-Parent Babies?
Dr Trevor Stammers

Both UK Houses of Parliament voted overwhelmingly in February this year, to change the law to allow three- and four-parent IVF techniques to be used in what will be de facto clinical human trials, once the Human Fertilisation & Embryology Authority (HFEA) is satisfied the techniques are safe. Whilst the aim of these trials is laudable in intending to prevent the transmission of debilitating and often fatal mitochondrial diseases, many cell biologists and bioethicists remain concerned about these techniques.

I have been particularly alarmed about the manipulation of language being utilised by its champions in the UK and though I will continue to refer to it as “3 or 4 parent IVF” since this is more accurate than “mitochondrial transfer” (the mother’s egg nucleus is what is transferred), the US term, MMT mitochondrial manipulation techniques (MMTs) is also a reasonable alternative.

International debate

Both before and after the Government votes, I have travelled widely in the past few months to speak about the issue and will continue to do so no doubt as the first HFEA licence is eventually given. I had a very lively debate on Al Jazeera television in February followed by a visit to address the very first National Bioethics Conference in Oman in March. This was followed by an opportunity to present my concerns at the European Parliament a few weeks later. In both Oman and at the EU, I discovered no dissent to the arguments I put forward at all and there appears to be worldwide concern that the UK has crossed an important ethical boundary in permitting a procedure which will clearly alter the germline, making changes which will be passed down the generations. Only in the UK, it seems, is there the confidence that we know enough to try the techniques in humans.

I suspect the path will not be as easy as its champions have portrayed and there may well be legal challenges in the EU as well as potential “failures” ending in abortion or miscarriage before a child without the disease is eventually born, if indeed it does prove possible at all. A well-reasoned dissenting view is necessary concerning MMTs both in the UK and internationally. I travel next to Vienna for a conference this summer to continue to urge other nations to wait before following the UK’s ill-advised and premature lead.

CBET NEWS and EVENTS

Mindfulness funding

CBET has won a £50,000 grant in collaboration with the University of Surrey. The grant from Health Education Kent, Surrey and Sussex is for a research project on the effectiveness of mindfulness training for professional nurses, and the sum of £15,000 goes to Prof Hunt, director of CBET, for the delivery of the experimental training programme, while the remainder goes to project partner Prof Ann Gallagher and research assistant Ms Kit Tapson, both of the University of Surrey, to develop research methods and conduct an expert Delphi Panel exercise. The research will be conducted with the cooperation of Frimley Park NHS Hospital.

Switzerland collaboration

A decision-making tool called REPVAD, designed by Prof Hunt, has been used effectively by nurse educators and managers for some years in hospitals in Switzerland. Now the tool is being fine-tuned for publication drawing on real-life clinical case studies by Hunt in collaboration with Christine Merzeder and Iren Bischofberger. REPVAD stands for ‘Reasoning, Evidence, Procedures, Values, Attitudes, Defences’ and is applied in small group discussions to critical incidents to gain an understanding of how good and bad decisions are made in healthcare scenarios. Merzeder is Clinical Coordinator ANP, Paracelsus-recovery.com, Health and Social care consultant, lecturer and academic modules developer, Kalaidos University of Applied Sciences, Department of Health Sciences, Zurich/Switzerland; and Bischofberger is Program Director, MSc in Nursing, and Vice Dean of the same Department at Kalaidos University.

Interdisciplinary conference on food

Following its mission of exploring ethics in an interdisciplinary setting CBET contributed to ‘Digesting Modernity: An interdisciplinary Study of Food’ hosted by St Mary’s University. Keynote speaker for the conference was Senior Lecturer in History at Liverpool Hope University, Dr Bryce Evans, who gave a paper on communal kitchens in Peru. St Mary’s Professor of English, Prof Alan Simmons, gave the Plenary Paper which surveyed food in literature from the Brothers Grimm to George Orwell. CBET’s Prof Hunt gave a paper on the ethics of food production and the adverse implications for society at large of moving from ‘intimate food production’ to ‘alienated food production’, in which people generally have no idea how to produce food or how the food they eat is technologically shaped and engineered. St Mary’s PhD Student and organiser of the conference, Kim Salmon, said, “Everyone went away singing the praises of St Mary’s University and demanding that the event become an annual one.”

CBET-Hospice collaboration

CBET recently partnered with local charity Princess Alice Hospice to deliver a workshop on the issues surrounding care for dying patients. “Making Sense of Decisions at the End of Life” was the theme of the Annual Ethics Study Day run by the Princess Alice Hospice in Esher, Surrey on Tuesday 13th January.
Introducing Dr Elisabetta Canetta

Physicist joins St Mary’s

CBET is delighted to have the support and collaboration of St Mary’s new physicist, Dr Elisabetta Canetta. She graduated from the Department of Physics of the Università di Bologna, Bologna (Italy) with an MPhys in Theoretical Nuclear Physics. In 2004, she obtained a PhD in Experimental Biophysics from the Université Joseph Fourier, Grenoble (France) with a thesis entitled “Micromanipulation of living cells by using an AFM spectrometer: Application to cancer”.

The same year, Dr Canetta moved to the UK where she has spent seven years working as a Research Fellow in nanobiophysics and soft matter at the University of Aberystwyth, the University of Surrey, and the University of St Andrews. In 2011, Dr Canetta moved to the School of Biosciences of Cardiff University as a Lecturer in Biophotonics and in 2013 she joined the School of Sport, Health, and Applied Science of St Mary’s University as Lecturer in Physics on the BSc (Hons) Applied Physics undergraduate course. She is currently a Senior Lecturer in Physics and Programme Director of the BSc (Hons) Applied Physics degree.

Theory and practice

As a theoretical nuclear physicist, Dr Canetta has investigated the regular and chaotic motions of heavy-nuclei. As a nanobiophysicist, Dr Canetta’s experience lies in the application of physics to life sciences. Her main research interest concerns the study of the nanostructural, nanomechanical (Atomic Force Microscopy) and biochemical (Confocal and Modulated Raman Spectroscopy) differences between normal and cancer cells, non-pathogenic and pathogenic yeasts, undifferentiated and differentiated stem cells and progenitor cells, and the characterisation of advanced materials at the nanoscale. She is also interested in the investigation of protein-protein interactions and DNA structures.

Science, ethics and religion

Recently, Dr Canetta has also started working on the relationship between nanotechnology and ethics and on the history and philosophy of physics with a particular interest for “Quantum Physics-Theology inter-relationship”, “Newton the theologian”, and “Einstein’s cosmic religion”. She and Prof Hunt are currently collaborating on a review article on ‘Food irradiation and polymer nanomaterials’, specially commissioned by the journal ‘Nanobiomedicine’.

CBET News and Events Continued

The hospice delivers palliative and end of life care and support for patients and their families, and the workshop provided staff with the opportunity to openly discuss the difficulties they face in their roles. Director of CBET, Prof Geoffrey Hunt, who is also the co-chair of the Hospice’s Clinical Ethics Group, opened the workshop with a presentation on Engaged Ethics which presented a conceptual tool for the analysis of interdisciplinary decision-making in a hospice setting. A wide range of professionals, including palliative care doctors and nurses, dieticians, speech therapists and physiotherapists, participated in the discussion of case studies led by Dr Craig Gannon, Deputy Director of the Hospice, and Prof Ann Gallagher of the University of Surrey.

Dr Gannon said, “The Annual Ethics Study Day proved to be a hugely enjoyable and highly educational day for presenters and attendees alike. It was brilliant to then see the participants using Professor Hunt’s ethics concepts, e.g., the need for ‘timeliness’, spontaneously and to great effect in the group-work later in the day. The whole event was highly evaluated, emphasising the importance of working together, linking hospice and academic colleagues to promote sound ethical decision making in our clinical practice.”

CBET PhD success

CBET congratulates its ethics doctoral candidate, Anthony McCarthy for the award by St Mary’s in March of the PhD for his thesis on ‘Ethical Sex: Sexual Choices and their Nature and Meaning’.

Dr McCarthy’s thesis aims to establish which kinds of sexual choices are morally good and which, in contrast, are morally bad. What are the moral conditions that are needed in order for sexual choices to be virtuous and contribute to human flourishing? In exploring that question, the related question is examined of why sex ‘matters’ morally and whether this is an area of life that is in some sense ‘special’ (requiring, for example, a specific virtue).

Science and Faith

Dr Elisabetta Canetta

The ‘Science and Faith’ one-day workshop at St Mary’s (18th May), is organised by the Applied Physics Department in collaboration with the Chaplaincy and the Theology Department

This workshop aims to facilitate the dialogue between scientists of different faiths or no-faith, theologians and philosophers to promote the “renaissance” of the lost synergy between science, theology, and philosophy. Think about the greatest minds of all times, they never made any distinction between their scientific, theological and philosophical studies. They were investigating scientific phenomena and trying to unravel natural truths using scientific and philosophical tools and with the only aim of understanding God. They were “natural philosophers”.

Think about Isaac Newton, who devoted his life to the study of mechanics and calculus, alchemy and the Bible; René Descartes to whom we owe the concepts of analytical geometry but also of the freedom of God’s act of creation, and of rationalism; Gottfried Leibniz, who developed mathematical calculus (in particular integration and differentiation) and who gave us one of the most beautiful and fascinating philosophical concepts: the “monads”.

Ancient and contemporary

Other notable examples of natural philosophers are Aristotle, one of the greatest scientists of ancient Greece whose interests spanned from physics to biology, but also the father of the theory of logic, and his teacher, Plato, who laid the foundations of most of western philosophy and science and whose interests spanned from physics and mathematics to religion and philosophy. More recently, the developments of the theory of relativity and of quantum physics were the last notable offspring of the marriage between science and religion (do not forget Einstein’s “cosmic religion”). This workshop is also part of a series of initiatives to strengthen the Catholic identity of St Mary’s University and to rediscover “that joy of searching for, discovering and communicating truth in every field of knowledge” (Encyclical “Ex Corde Ecclesiae” – 15th August 1990).

The speakers

The Science and Faith workshop is constituted of four workshops in which the relationship between science and faith is explored from the points of view of scientists, theologians and philosophers. Drs Elisabetta Canetta and Ali Mozaffari (Applied Physics Department – St Mary’s University) are physicists who approach physics with a religious insight. Dr Anthony Towey (Aquinas Centre – St Mary’s University) is interested in theological pedagogy. Dr Ignacio Silva (Iain Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion – Oxford University) has interests in the science-religion interface and the philosophy of science with particular emphasis on the issues regarding the Divine Action. CBET bio-ethicists, Prof Geoffrey Hunt (philosopher) and Dr Trevor Stammers (medical doctor), have interests lying in the limits of science and the relationship between science and religion, respectively. Dr Stephen Bulivant (Theology Department – St Mary’s University) has a particular interest in the relationship between theology and Darwinism, and a more general interest in the ways in which appeals to ‘science’ are used as justifications for atheism.
Some philosophical thoughts on encouraging or assisting suicide

Prof David A Jones

The question of whether suicide is ever something to be advocated as good or right or honorable is one with which philosophers have struggled down the centuries. To take such terrible action requires a certain kind of courage (and someone may well be restrained from suicide by fear), but Aristotle (384–322 BCE) and others after him have thought that suicide ultimately embodies a failure of courage. It takes more courage to live. Likewise Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), who is the philosopher who has most exalted the right and duty of human beings to make autonomous moral choices, regarded suicide as a failure to respect human nature in one’s own case: not an act of autonomy but a failure to respect autonomy.

Suicide, moralism and mental ill health

These classical philosophical accounts seem distant from the way that suicide is typically framed in modern culture. Remarks like those of Aristotle or Kant can seem excessively judgmental or moralistic, insufficiently aware of the extent to which suicide is typically the expression of a disturbed mind, a matter of mental (ill) health and not simply one of moral (bad) judgement.

Considerations about suicide from the perspective of mental health represents an advance in understanding, and one that is more important for at least some practical purposes than the classical arguments against suicide. The assistance of suicide remains a crime not simply because suicide may be an expression of weakness or selfishness, or a failure to respect humanity in oneself. The assistance of suicide is a crime above all because suicide is a form of self-harm typically associated with mental ill-health, and encouraging or facilitating a suicide is thus a failure of care for someone who is suicidal. If a detention centre for asylum seekers had witnessed a spate of suicides it would be no worse than a failure to respect human nature in one’s own case: not an act of autonomy but a failure to respect autonomy.

In praise of suicide

Praising suicide as an expression of personal choice or autonomy suffers from two problems. In the first place it underplays the extent to which suicide is a mental-health issue and, just as much as classic views, suffers from assuming that suicide is, in general or for the most part, the act of a fully rational person. Advocating suicide as an expression of autonomy or a ‘right’ is just another kind of moralism. It normalises and thus effectively encourages or promotes suicide.

In the second place, inasmuch as suicide can be understood as a moral or rational choice, it is inadequate to see it only as a matter of personal choice. This is to neglect the weight of the moral and philosophical tradition, from Aristotle to Kant, and to disguise or minimise the adverse effects of suicide on those left behind and indeed on the whole of society (if suicide becomes acceptable for a society then this undermines that society’s understanding of human dignity, including the dignity inherent in human life itself).

It may be argued that legalising physician assisted suicide would ameliorate some of the harms of unregulated suicide, in that, even if people still died, their deaths would be less painful and less isolated and bereaved relatives would be less traumatised. Not only does this attempted counter argument ignore the problem of society’s complicity in self-harm but it seems to assume that legalising assisted suicide makes other, worse kinds of suicide less likely. However, there is no evidence for this. Both Oregon and Washington have seen an increase in unregulated suicide since introducing this kind of legislation.

In conclusion

Philosophical and mental health considerations, and the negative consequences which follow from suicide (at least generally and for the most part), constitute a strong argument in favour of finding strategies for suicide prevention. Such strategies run counter to the rationale and likely consequences of the legalisation of assisted suicide.

The following remarks are taken from written evidence by Professor David Albert Jones of CBET in advance of oral evidence he gave before the Scottish Parliament Health and Sport Committee on 20th January 2015.

Contemporary challenges in mental health

Dr Pia Matthews

At St Mary’s last year we successfully launched a new initiative based on the strategy, ‘no health without mental health’. Our inaugural conference on mental health, hosted by InSpiRe in co-operation with CBET, was entitled Contemporary Challenges in Mental Health Ministry.

That conference was part of the drive to raise awareness of mental health issues and to address issues of stigma and discrimination. The feedback from those who attended the conference was that this could mark the beginning of a bigger conversation and there emerged a clear sense of the need for ‘more’. So the next question for CBET and InSpiRe was how to carry on and also extend the conversation. The advantage of the conference was that it brought people engaged on the same enterprise together, and it gave an opportunity for those present to give a steer to ways forward.

This year’s conference, Mental Well-Being: Listening with Compassion, is in collaboration with the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales, The South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust, the Multi-faith Chaplaincy of the University of Surrey and Durham University’s Project for Spirituality, Theology and Health. The conference will include a reflection from Bishop Moth, bishop elect for the Diocese of Arundel and Brighton, on compassion in mercy with reference to Pope Francis’s encyclical, Evangelii Gaudium. Sr Mairead Quigley will lead on group listening. These will be followed by a workshop on recovery and spirituality and CBET’s Dr Trevor Stammers will be offering a workshop on poetry and compassion. The final speaker will be Professor Chris Cooke who has written on spirituality and mental health, recently focusing on theological and psychotherapeutic engagement with mental well-being. (For more details and booking, contact Steph Modak at inspire@stmarys.ac.uk; booking form: www.stmarys.ac.uk/listening-with-compasion).

In conjunction with what we hope will become an annual conference, CBET and InSpiRe will be organising a series of study days. The first one will be on mental health and young people at university. The aim of all of these days is to begin the conversation and involve as many people as possible in what is, after all, a subject that affects us all. However, by exploring poetry and compassion, Dr Trevor Stammers indicates that the mental health conversation is not simply an academic exercise. There is much to be gained from using the insights and different approaches of poetry, music, art, drama, story, in the conversation. This is not new, and there has been much research on the importance of, for example, art therapy. By bringing all of these different areas into the conversation I hope that we will add breadth and depth to reflection to mental well-being.