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UNSETTLING THE APOCALYPSE

Uncertainty in spirituality and religion

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Introduction: the end

A wave of apocalyptic language has emerged around a heightened sense of crisis in climate change and biodiversity loss, and the inadequacy of effective responses to it. Among the participants in recent Extinction Rebellion protests are Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and others who overtly link their activism to religious and spiritual convictions. In May 2019 a UK shadow cabinet minister warned of impacts of ‘biblical proportions: droughts, pestilence, famine, floods, wildfires, mass migration, political instability, war and terrorism’ (Hansard 2019). It seems that earthly language alone is not sufficient to capture the immensity of the problems that the world faces.

The search for religious ways to express fears of catastrophe is not a new phenomenon, even in modern times. In response to the threat of nuclear weapons, Sallie McFague (1987) proposed a change in theological language away from patriarchy and monarchy towards more caring, ecologically sensitive, nurturing ‘models’ of God. Stefan Skrimshire wrote a decade ago about a flurry of apocalyptic rhetoric on the climate at the time, as the latest punctuation point in a long story in which apocalyptic thought had been ‘stitched’ into foundational ideas about history, progress and science (Skrimshire 2010). In the same volume, Mike Hulme cited ‘presaging apocalypse’ as one of four ways that problems around climate change were being framed: as a ‘call to action’, but not one that left much room for discussion about what that action should be (Hulme 2010: 43–46).

Today, there are at least four related things going on in the current outpouring of religious terms in response to environmental problems. First, religious stories about the ‘end of days’ are a useful shorthand to dramatise and simplify the powerful, disruptive or destructive forces being felt in many parts of the world. Second, the rhetoric points to the proper meaning of ‘apocalypse’ as a revelation or uncovering – with a call to action that emphasises ‘listening’ or ‘paying attention’ to experts, or

to the experiences of vulnerable people. Third, the overt religiosity of recent climate protests, combining and appropriating various traditions and rituals, suggests that people are searching for emotional and spiritual responses to feelings of crisis, attempting to create spaces for consolation or reflection. Fourth, putting environmental problems in religious terms brings their moral and cultural dimensions to the surface – dimensions that are often neglected by dominant approaches based on technical or market-based ‘solutions’.

Climate change is not the only challenge facing the world, and apocalyptic stories are not the only way that religious language can help to explore the emotional and moral dimensions of uncertainty. In a wide variety of contexts – from migration to science and technology, disaster response, disease emergence, care of nature and the valuation of resources – uncertainties are more than just risks to be calculated and overcome. Fears and hopes are not just global: they can be local, very specific – personal even. Religious language and practices have long been a resource for capitalising on these emotions or helping people deal with them, by connecting local, personal struggles to wider institutions, bigger stories and deeper histories. Apocalyptic visions may stir strong feelings, but they lead too easily to despair, and it is hard to connect them to the myriad everyday struggles that people face and the many possible ways things can turn out. Happily, as discussed below, other visions and other stories are available.

Asking what makes people uncertain across so many areas of life raises some big questions. How do we know what is real and true? How do people deal with disagreement and different points of view regarding facts or values? How do people interpret why things happen and work out how to respond to them? How do people reflect, console, shelter or care for people when the unexpected happens? How do people create flexible, resilient structures and practices in the face of unpredictable events? In a world that is often marked by injustice and destruction, how can one hope to imagine that things could be different in the future?

Looking at religious answers to these questions shows a rich variety of responses – often shaped by experiences and wider culture. These responses challenge the modern pressure to conform to a single ideal or optimal way of dealing with uncertainty, ambiguity and ignorance, either by managing them as risk or sweeping them under the carpet. They show possibilities for responding to uncertainty with humility about what can be known, and creating flexible spaces or practices to prepare for when things go wrong. They can also show the dangers of rigid, doctrinaire approaches to problems that demand flexibility and humility in the face of the unknown or unexpected.

Amid pressures to accept dominant narratives about capitalism, single-track solutions, global crisis, progress and development, understanding religion may prove to be a vital tool, among others, for breaking fixed and predictable visions apart, and showing plural ways of seeing and alternative ways of valuing the world and each other. This chapter focuses on how religious thought (in particular, drawing from my own partial knowledge of Christian traditions, with some tentative comparisons with other faiths) can help to foster these qualities of humility, care and sanctuary,

and considers their practical implications. The central idea is that religious thought-worlds can *unsettle* the assumptions that are built into dominant modes of progress and development, to reveal and highlight new possibilities for thought and action.

Certainty and uncertainty

It is a stereotype that religions offer certainty to their adherents. Like many stereotypes, this is partly based on truth. Religious beliefs and structures can offer a kind of security to believers facing uncertain futures or deep questions about the nature of consciousness, the origins of the universe or how to know the difference between right and wrong. A part of spiritual and mystical experience across traditions is a feeling of certainty that can be emotionally overwhelming, even if it only lasts a moment. To some, the sense of belonging to a community also offers a sense of protection against the unknown.

Religious convictions can also provide a space for reaction and entrenchment. Fundamentalism is not just a fervent belief in God(s) or doctrines, it aids decision-making: non-believers are considered as either satanic enemies or targets for conversion; questioning believers are seen as betrayers of the faith and abettors of impurity, not just incorrect but evil. In response to these perceived dangers, believers are urged to return to sacred texts, authority figures or individual prayer to determine the clear path to be taken, often in terms of opposing, dominating, expelling or conquering malevolent forces.

Authoritarian politics has made good use of these qualities, from Bolivia to the United States (Berlet and Sunshine 2019) and India (Vanaik 2018), and in other examples elsewhere and throughout history (for example in the important role of theology in justifying Apartheid in South Africa). In these settings, religious assertions of certainty are inextricably bound up in party, racial, class and gender politics, foreign policy, history, borders, security and cultures around food, drink, sexuality, dress and other forms of consumption. Rather than provoking a challenge to power or the liberation of the spirit, authoritarian politics uses religious institutions and ideas as vehicles for judgement and domination in its demands for conformity of behaviour, othering of outgroups and uniformity of thought.

But this is not the whole story. Religions also point deliberately towards the unknown and unknowable. John Gray (2007: 207) says that rather than aiming for consensus and comprehensive knowledge of the world, 'Religions are not claims to knowledge but ways of living with what cannot be known'. Fundamentalism acknowledges this lack of control by denying it. In other, perhaps more subtle, ways religious thought can serve to unsettle fundamental assumptions that are built into logics of risk management, humanitarian efforts, migration policy, technology and conservation, alongside other domains of life. These assumptions may themselves originate in a moral world that is shaped by religious thought, but in the many settings where plural cultures and worldviews are present it is worth examining how religious ideas can also expose uncertainties and alternative ways of seeing.

What is unsettled by the religious and spiritual imagination are not just ideas about moral choices or values in any simple sense. Religious thinking upsets conventional modern notions of how history and time behave: the logical relationships between cause and effect; what is considered to be natural, alive or conscious; where truth comes from; how to respond to danger and the threat of death; what freedom or emancipation means; the relationships between humans and animals, plants and land; and who deserves our attention or care. These are themes that might point the way beyond the certain doom implied by apocalyptic visions, on the one hand, and controlled – purportedly neutral and unbiased – technical approaches to reducing risk and managing security, on the other.

For example, what does it mean to see animals, plants, celestial bodies and the weather not as resources or threats, but as fellow worshippers of God, as in the *Benedicite*?¹ What does it mean to see the material world as an illusion, or as a good creation, or alternatively as evil or corrupted? What does it mean to perceive that souls can migrate from humans to animals, and back again; or that there is a sacred quality in all living things, or in particular ones? What does it mean to imagine that a rock or an artefact is endowed with a spirit or consciousness? What does it mean to say that all people are brothers and sisters, or that animals and humans are siblings? How do myths about dangerous parts of nature – large animals, storms, fire and so on – help people to deal with fears about them and engender respect for them?

All of these questions affect how people see the building blocks of life, how things are perceived to work, how they should work, what connects them and how they are able to change. If not simply dismissed as illogical or archaic, these questions can shed light on the things that different people prioritise as important, and what motivates the decisions they make. In some cases, as in indigenous worldviews that are often marginalised in policy, religious stories and concepts are repositories of sophisticated knowledge about the natural world – to take one example, the rich descriptions of nature–human relations in Māori cosmology (Harmsworth and Awatere 2013: 274–286). Religious myths are often full of descriptions of nature, but in contrast to scientific texts, they tend to assign value to it and underline how humans are supposed to exist in relation to other parts of nature.

The point here is not to aim for a consensus on any of these stories and concepts, or treat them as equivalent to each other. Indeed, many people in modern societies are exposed (to some extent) to plural accounts. Even within religions themselves, accepted truths are maintained and reinforced through storytelling, creeds, educational institutions and so on; but many religions also have a history of challenge, debate and dissension that is visible in texts and doctrines. Looking at the unsettling aspects and contradictory claims of religion is a step towards a pluralistic approach to uncertainty that recognises the value of different perspectives, not as a way of integrating them or adding them to an ever-growing set of data, but in the desire to '[hold] different ways of knowing as equal' and value the 'discontinuities and contradictions' that arise (Nightingale *et al.* 2019: 3).

'Neither light nor darkness, but both together'

Religions do not just provide a way of living with uncertainties about what is out there in the world, but, internally, religions can also unsettle themselves. Deeply embedded in many religious traditions is a darkness: the idea that the truth itself is never fully knowable, that God or gods are hidden or mysterious, or that truth is best expressed in terms of paradoxes or contradictions. This idea is present at the heart of many religions and spiritual traditions, downplayed in some (for example in some evangelical traditions in Christianity) and emphasised in others (for example in contemplative and mystical traditions in many faiths²).

The assertive claims to 'truth' that are sometimes made, and the colonising and dominating violence committed in the name of religion, may mask or repress this central insight. But an important set of ideas embedded in religious traditions maintains that the most significant truths are beyond human comprehension, pointed to by revelation. Canonical texts are full of mysteries, myths, poetry and parables; images or statues of God are prohibited in some traditions; Zen *kōans*, riddles or puzzles used in certain meditation practices, offer a path to wisdom via apparent paradoxes, puns and allusions, not by straightforward assertions. In John Henry Newman's words, applied to Christian notions of truth:

The religious truth is neither light nor darkness, but both together: it is like the dim view of a country seen in the twilight. Revelation, in this way of seeing it, is not a revealed system, but consists of a number of detached and incomplete truths belonging to a vast system unrevealed (Oakley 2012: vi).

In this view, there may be an objective reality, but it lies outside our comprehension. Darkness, blinding lights, oceans, clouds, mirrors, nothingness are the operative metaphors.

This notion of incomprehensible truth is in tension with the constant repeated impulse to *experience* the divine. The words 'For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known' (1 Corinthians 13:12, NIV) imply that it is an inescapable part of the human condition to have only a partial, clouded understanding of the divine: and yet this is accompanied by the hope of a more intimate and perfect knowledge through grace. But this is not as much of a contradiction as it seems. The point is that one can experience something without fully comprehending it. This is more than an intellectual process. The unsettling experience of *awe* or the *sublime* may be approached through meditation and fasting, through art or immersion in nature; religious traditions provide a framework through which to connect these experiences to people's understanding of the nature of spirit, gods or God. Liturgies and rituals depend on bodily and sensual experiences (or the deliberate absence of them, as in intentional periods of silence) as part of the process of listening or knowing. The 'knowing' of Corinthians is not about understanding a collection of facts.

Knowledge becomes less about adding information, and more about a process of deepening relationships – including between humans, and sometimes in relation to other creatures, living and non-living.

Shaping responses

What does this mean for a politics of uncertainty? If the very core and ground of truth is accepted to be mysterious, then assertive statements about what is natural or self-evident may be open to challenge. It may also encourage some scepticism about claims to power on the part of authorities. It may allow some humility about the idea of being able to fully understand or predict mechanisms in the natural world and human society. If the deepest kind of knowledge is achieved through a relational process, this may serve to highlight the importance of *encounters* in producing and deepening knowledge.

These ideas are by no means dominant everywhere in religious contexts, but highlighting them can spark an important conversation about how people arrive at knowledge and truths. Opening these ideas up could enable religious people to take part in a deeper conversation with others about uncertainty in the material and social world.

Why does this matter? For a politics of uncertainty, it is important not just to understand what people do, or even just why they do it, or even just what is involved in the process of deciding to do it, but also what it means to them to act (or not). If we describe uncertainty as being produced ‘under a particular view’, rather than as a ‘condition out there in the world’ (Stirling 2019), this means examining what shapes that view, and what therefore shapes the ongoing response to a perceived uncertainty.

For example, religious narratives about the dangers of technology may be ‘implicit’ and at cross-purposes with other ways of thinking about risk, so ‘proponents of technology attempting progress at a level of simple risk analysis will simply be talking past any voices propelled by ... deeply swimming stories of warning’ (McLeish 2015: 193). In responses to migration too there is no unified religious response. Concepts that emphasise the brotherhood/sisterhood of all people, the diaspora of believers (in Islam and Judaism, among others), long traditions of asylum (Rowlands 2015) and scriptural stories about the experience of exile can be brought to bear in fostering more caring approaches.

For example, a church in The Hague held a service continuously for 96 days to shelter a family of asylum seekers. Religious establishments, even temporary ones like that in the ‘Jungle’ camp in Calais in 2015, have been important gathering points for people on the move. Examples of sanctuary and refuge are a counterpoint to more exclusionary politics, some of which also invoke religion defensively against perceived threats. The idea of providing sanctuary, shelter and support also applies to disasters such as floods; here, religious institutions are often well-placed to provide practical space for people to gather, as well as pastoral support or the mobilisation of funds.

These responses may be motivated (at least in part) by religious convictions, but the relationship between doctrines and action is complicated. Religious and spiritual views are in dialogue with a wider set of identities, politics and worldviews that inform a person or group. A ‘perspective’ or ‘worldview’ is rarely a simple thing.

Within religions themselves, there are tensions and disagreements about how to respond to sources of uncertainty. This plurality means that it is risky to make assumptions about how someone will behave just based on a religious (self-)identity. It also means that inclusive, flexible approaches to uncertainty need to be reinforced and debated within religious communities themselves. An example is the Pope’s Lampedusa sermon and *Laudato Si’* (see Rowlands 2015), which emphasise the importance of care for migrants and the challenge of ecological integrity: these have not met with universal approval even from Catholics. In these circumstances, advocates of care and solidarity within religious communities need to reach for traditions and stories that support their cause.

Hope

In the Christian tradition, as in others, these kinds of practical responses and expressions of mutual aid are seen as being part of a bigger story. Efforts to challenge power or to care for vulnerable people are acts of hopeful prefiguration. The animating vision, that of the Kingdom of Heaven, is not merely a utopian vision of the future. The community is meant to see itself as part of the action of making it present here and now, even though in sometimes small, imperfect ways.

One of the most powerful expressions of this kind of hope is the meaning given to the *Magnificat* (‘He hath put down the mighty from their seat / And hath exalted the humble and meek’) – abundance, mercy or justice, an end to conflict and the fading away of earthly riches. Many early Christians expected this to be quite imminent, and hope is always somehow looking towards the final end; although it is important to note that some traditions within Christianity largely ignore or attempt to neutralise the radical potential of these ideas, while others value them as an urgent call to participate in revolutionary justice, linked to specific political struggles (Cardenal 2008).

Hope is one of the three things that ‘remain’ or ‘abide’ in earthly experience in 1 Corinthians 13 (with faith and love), in expectation of fulfilment at the end. Rather than an abstract wish for things to be better (‘I hope that the world will not end tomorrow’),³ or necessarily pinned to a particular programme of action, hope is found *in* God, rather than in human power or authority, and is therefore by nature unpredictable and ungovernable. This means that when Christians talk about hope they are probably not talking about a vague wish or assurance that somebody else will make everything alright, as hope is inseparable from *faith* and *love*.

In other words, hope is in a threefold relation with what might be termed ‘trust within a collective search towards God’ (faith), and ‘the active giving of oneself in a relation of interdependence’ (love). The obvious danger is that hope on its own becomes merely individualised, or a fantasy of justice in the afterlife, permitting

great injustices to be tolerated; but linking hope to faith and love may help to bring it down from the clouds, for nobody can tolerate for very long the suffering of someone they love.

This kind of hope does not deny the reality of present suffering or the possibility that things will continue to be hard long into the future. It is a hope that emerges through accompaniment of those who need it. It rests on the hard truth that the future is genuinely not fully known, that there are cracks in the confident stories we tell each other about the future, through which alternatives might emerge and flourish, if they are nurtured.

Giving shape to hope: stories and histories

Sometimes the most direct way to tell the truth is to tell a totally implausible story, like a myth (Interview with Ursula Le Guin, in Freeman (2008)).

Expressions of hope in Christianity, as in other religions, look backwards as well as forwards (note the past tense of the *Magnificat*). This may seem strange – how do you hope for something that has already happened? But stories give shape to hope: they provide patterns and continuities that are always being reinterpreted and retold in response to new events.

Stories are central to how knowledge is embedded in religions, perhaps even more than rituals or institutional structures; indeed, rituals are often a way of dramatising or remembering the shape and meaning of a story. Stories come before doctrine. Stories may permit uncertainty, confusion, debate and multiple perspectives in a way that doctrines cannot easily achieve. Tom McLeish (2015: 193) describes the book of Job in the Hebrew Bible as a text that uses the device of legal debate to create ‘an area in which different accounts can emerge ... six differentiated views of human response to the natural world’. The four Christian Gospels have resisted efforts to combine them into a single narrative. Ancient stories have been reinterpreted and retold by newer religions. And a key part of the colonising influence of religion has been to try to erase old stories and impose new ones. Stories can imprison as well as liberate.

Stories also encode knowledge in ways that allow it to be passed on through generations. In the Sundarbans, the delta region across the India/Bangladesh border, stories about Bonbibi (the ‘lady of the forest’) shape the way people treat the perils of the forest and the aggressive tigers who live there (Jalais 2010). These stories also unite communities, across religious boundaries, in traditions and rituals that reinforce the identity of islanders, in the face of encroachments from conservation NGOs and civil authorities. The story of Bonbibi, in bringing together Islamic and Hindu elements, reflects the history of migration into the region and the way that cultural conflicts were dealt with in the process (Ghosh *et al.* 2018: 10). But, as wider economies and environments change rapidly, patterns of worship are changing too. Prawn seed collectors are increasingly drawn to venerate the goddess Kali, a figure associated with more violent and risky behaviours (Jalais 2010: 119–120).

Here, stories and worship practices are bound up with perceptions about class and livelihoods.

The challenge for cultures in which religion is a shaping force – which applies in many parts of the world – is how these stories and myths might survive the accelerating change brought on by new technologies, changes in societies and the large-scale destruction of places and habitats. More than just surviving, how might religious stories and cultures respond to, challenge or shed new light on these processes of change?

A broader politics of uncertainty needs to be critically aware of the stories – whether spiritual in origin or not – that shape people’s imaginative worlds and the practices or structures that enable action or connection. Stories need to be recognised for their value without being fossilised. Some lost or forgotten stories with emancipatory power might be rediscovered. Some will be rejected or altered beyond recognition. Through dialogue with other traditions or encounters with new sources of uncertainty, stories can retain their power to move and inspire action. Through exchanging stories and noting their differences, people can identify what makes their own stories more distinctive. In reckoning with the multiple perspectives and ways of interpreting the world that exist, rediscovering different stories and myths can reveal the values and limitations of these perspectives. Together, they can help to navigate through a life that remains full of uncertainty and rich with the promise of other possible worlds.

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Notes

- 1 www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/common-material/canticles/benedicite-song-creation.
- 2 e.g. ‘O thou who art hidden in that which is hidden, thou art more than all. All see themselves in thee and they see thee in everything. Since thy dwelling is surrounded by guards and sentinels how can we come near to thy presence?’ (Attar 1971: 4); ‘He moves, and he moves not. He is far, and he is near. He is within all, and he is outside all ... The face of truth remains hidden behind a circle of gold’ (Mascaro 2005: 4); ‘The godliest knowledge of God is that which is known through ignorance’ (Spearing 2001: 96).
- 3 See also Romans 8:24 (RSV): ‘Now hope that is seen is not hope’.

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