

“Well-meaning but somewhat naïve”? A response to the GWPF briefing paper: *The Papal Encyclical – a critical Christian response by Bernard Donoughue and Peter Forster.*

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It is not often that two members of the House of Lords suggest that the Pope is ‘well-meaning but somewhat naïve’. However, the Global Warming Policy Foundation (GWPF) Briefing paper by Bernard Donoughue and Peter Forster does just that. The briefing paper *The Papal Encyclical – a critical Christian response* (July 2015)¹ is published by the GWPF, a think-tank which ‘while open-minded on the contested science of global warming’, is deeply concerned about the policy implications. Its chairman (Lord Nigel Lawson) and other Trustees and members of its Academic Advisory Council are well known to be extremely sceptical about the scientific consensus on climate change as embodied in the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and are very critical of UK government policies aimed at the reduction of our dependence on fossil fuels.

Baron Donoughue (a Labour Peer since 1985, former senior lecturer at the LSE, and head of the Number 10 Policy Unit under Harold Wilson and James Callaghan), and Dr Peter Forster (a chemistry graduate who is now Church of England Bishop of Chester), writing in a personal capacity, offer what they call a ‘critical Christian response’ to the recent Encyclical from Pope Francis about our human responsibility of care for God’s earth, *Laudato Si: On Care for our Common Home*.² There have been many enthusiastic responses to the papal Encyclical, but not, apparently, from the GWPF.

The GWPF authors rightly say that climate change occupies less than 10% of the Encyclical, though it is that which has received the majority of secular press attention. They offer some remarks on the Pope’s wider agenda, and then themselves concentrate on the Encyclical’s statements on climate change. Their main concern is that although they share the Pope’s deep desire to reduce poverty, and agree that the costs should fall primarily on the richer nations, and the rich within nations, they think the energy policies advocated in the Encyclical are more likely to hinder than advance this cause. They conclude that the Encyclical is ‘well-meaning but somewhat naïve’, and that it seems to rest on a gently idealized, even myopic, view of the world.

To my mind, the GWPF paper seriously misrepresents what the Pope is saying. There is very little (apart from a couple of biblical quotations) which characterize their paper as a distinctively ‘Christian’ response to the Encyclical, as their paper is sub-titled. I have to say that to me it reads mostly as an expression of GWPF concerns about climate change policy, and uses the Encyclical to provide a few pegs on which to hang their own views. It is not a considered response to a very wide-ranging, theologically and passionately argued plea from the Pope for humanity to recover its God-given vocation to live responsibly, sustainably, justly and joyously in relation to God’s creation.

¹ Forster, P. and Donoughue, B. (2015) *The Papal Encyclical. A critical Christian response*. The Global Warming Policy Foundation, GWPF Briefing 20. <http://www.thegwpf.org/content/uploads/2015/07/Forster-Donoughue1.pdf> (accessed 19 August 2015).

² *Laudato Si: On Care for our Common Home*. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/Encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (accessed 19 August 2015).

The Encyclical

The Encyclical opens with a reminder of earlier Catholic social teaching on the environment, human ecology and the deterioration of nature, and leads the Pope to an urgent appeal to protect the common home that God has entrusted to us. He appeals for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of the planet. The Pope seeks to draw both on the best scientific research available, and on principles from the Judeo-Christian tradition. He points to the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet, and discusses ‘what is happening to our common home’ in terms of the ‘common good’ and ‘sustainable human development’. It is at that point he refers to climate change, the depletion of natural resources including fresh water, the loss of biodiversity, the decline in the quality of human life and the breakdown of society. He argues that the human environment and the natural environment are integrally related, and we need to hear ‘both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor’. Both are aspects of our calling to act justly and to combat the damaging effects of inequality. The Pope deplores the weakness of political leadership, and acknowledges the importance of honest debate.

Although the Encyclical is addressed to ‘all people of good will’, the Pope appropriately offers a substantial discussion of biblical and theological perspectives on creation, humanity in the divine image, Christology, God’s life-giving Spirit, a universal communion and the destiny of all things within the mystery of Christ.

In the light that theology and of our God-given human responsibility to care for God’s earth, the Pope recognizes the human roots of our current ecological crisis. While giving thanks for science and technology, he warns against the ‘technocratic paradigm’, which dominates economic and political life in ways that often diminish human and social life. The growing tendency to over-consumption and waste in modern ‘anthropocentrism’ go against God’s calling of humanity to ‘responsible stewardship’. ‘There can be no renewal of our relationship with nature’, the Pope argues, ‘without a renewal of humanity itself.’ (118). In the light of his theology of human dignity, he offers reflections on abortion, on employment, on work, on new biological technologies including GM, and on housing.

The Encyclical argues that everything is interconnected, and that we urgently need a humanism capable of bringing together ecology, economics, social institutions and culture in place of the consumerist vision of human beings that actually diminishes us. A central and unifying principle of social ethics is ‘the common good’ which implies solidarity with the poorest of humanity. The common good also extends to future generations and the kind of world we are leaving behind us. Environmental change has so stretched the planet’s capacity that contemporary life-styles in the richer parts of the world are unsustainable.

The Pope calls for action along these lines: international dialogue on the need to replace highly polluting fossil fuels, a dialogue for new national and local policies working for energy efficiency and reduced consumption, transparency in decision making and a realization that profit cannot be the sole criterion for technological innovation, a dialogue about human fulfillment: ‘politics must not be subject to the economy’ (189). There need to be efforts to promote a sustainable use of natural resources and a willingness to accept decreased growth in some parts of the world so that others can be more healthy (193). The Pope welcomes a dialogue with science and with the various ecological movements. Above all we human beings need a lifestyle that is sustainable, which energises the struggle for justice and peace, and which joyously celebrates life - in other words, a spirituality of which the Christian tradition has a rich heritage. ‘Christian spirituality proposes a growth marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little.’ (222). Care for nature is part of a lifestyle that includes the capacity for living together

and in communion. The Pope closes his ‘lengthy reflection which has been both joyful and troubling’, with reference to sacraments as a way in which nature is taken up into God to become a means of mediating supernatural life, and then with reference to God the Holy Trinity and to Mary, the Mother of creation, and with prayers to the God of creation, justice, beauty and love.

A reader of the GWPF briefing paper may not realize the richly detailed and far-ranging discussion the Pope offers which, far from being myopic, idealized or naïve strikes me as broad-visioned, realistic and deeply rooted. We turn now to the specific themes from the Encyclical picked up by Lord Donoughue and Bishop Peter Forster.

Poverty

The GWPF paper is right to emphasise the Pope’s urgent pleas about poverty, and it acknowledges the Christian calling to contentment with little, but says (in apparent opposition to the Pope) that this ‘is entirely compatible with an aspiration to improve one’s immediate human lot.’ Much of the developed world, they say, has a much better quality of life and greater life expectancy than earlier generations, largely due to wealth creation and economic success. The impression given is that the Encyclical is opposed to all economic growth, which in fact it is not.

What the Encyclical actually says is that while ‘every effort to protect and improve our world entails profound changes.. authentic human development has a moral character’ (5). The Pope appeals for a ‘new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of the planet’ (14), and offers some guidelines for the ‘common good’ and for ‘sustainable human development’ (15, 18).

The Pope is concerned about climate change getting in the way of alleviating poverty, and the quotation from the developing world used by Christian Aid is pertinent: Forget about making poverty history: climate change will make poverty permanent. A glance at the work being done in the developing world by Christian Aid, CAFOD, Tearfund and many other aid agencies demonstrate the current effects and fears for the future of climate change. The IPCC AR5 paper³ also underlines the fact that it is people living in poverty ‘who are socially, economically, culturally, politically, institutionally or otherwise marginalised’ who are especially vulnerable to climate change. The recent Lancet Report on health and climate change underlines the point.⁴ It is a pity the GWPF paper does not acknowledge that.

Fossil fuels

The GWPF paper notes that fossil fuels are nature’s primary and very efficient means of storing the energy of the sun. They rightly say that there were genuine environmental gains in the switch to fossil fuels at the Industrial Revolution, but then surprisingly add ‘nature is in most trouble in societies that have not yet made the switch’. The paper goes on to argue that emerging economies need to be allowed to grow and develop in a similar way. ‘Stopping their growth at this point would be unlikely to produce the results which the Pope desires.’

³ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2013/14). Fifth Assessment Report (AR5) <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/> (accessed 19 August 2015).

⁴ Health and climate change: policy responses to protect public health (2015). *The Lancet*. <http://www.thelancet.com/commissions/climate-change> (accessed 19 August 2015).

But nowhere does the Pope suggest that emerging economies should not be allowed to grow. It is the richer countries that have caused most damage and need to consume less. What he says is that ‘the developed countries ought to help pay this [ecological] debt by significantly limiting their consumption of non-renewable energy and by assisting poorer countries to support policies and programmes of sustainable development.’ (52).

The GWPF paper adds a comment on ‘fuel poverty’ in the UK which, they say ‘is undoubtedly being made worse.. by current environmental policies.’ They refer to the huge subsidies for renewable energy leading to higher energy bills for everyone including the poorest people. What they do not say is that there are many other ways of responding justly to fuel poverty than by reducing subsidies for renewable energy. Nor do they say anything about the huge subsidies government has given over the years to the fossil fuel industries, nor to the plea in April 2015 from the President of the World Bank for immediate scrapping of fossil fuel subsidies, nor to the warning from the Governor of the Bank of England that a high proportion of fossil fuel reserves will have to remain unburned if we are to combat climate change with any effectiveness.

Markets

The GWPF authors say that ‘there is a great deal in the Encyclical about the evils of ‘the market’, though – they argue - it is unclear precisely what alternative the Pope is advocating, and they even disingenuously hint that the only alternative to ‘the market’ could be a return to communism.

The GWPF authors rightly underline the importance of markets in the sense that, by markets, the fruits of human activity and enterprise are established and shared. They suggest that the Pope’s Encyclical could be read as encouraging an attack on markets in principle.

In fact I don’t think the Encyclical encourages any such reading, and nowhere does the Pope speak of the ‘evil’ of markets. The Encyclical says nothing that would disagree with ‘the importance of markets by which the fruits of human enterprise are shared’. It does, though, give a very strong warning not against ‘markets’, but against ‘The Market’. As Karl Polanyi⁵ argued seventy years ago, ‘the market’ in the sense of exchange of commodities is of ancient origin. The Market as the primary organizing principle of society originated in the ‘great transformation’ from feudalism to capitalism. It is to the idolatry of ‘The Market’ which the Pope refers to when he says ‘whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenceless before the interests of a deified market, which becomes the only rule.’ (56). He objects to the ‘mindset of those who say: Let us allow the invisible forces of the market to regulate the economy, and consider their impact on society and nature as collateral damage’ (123). The Pope is here very close to Polanyi’s formulation: ‘the control of the economic system by the market is of overwhelming consequence to the whole organization of society: it means no less than the running of society as an adjunct to the market. Instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system.’⁶

Or, as a more contemporary writer, Michael Sandel⁷, argues, we need to speak not only of a market economy; we have become: a *market society* in which everything becomes a commodity with a price tag. It is this, I believe, that drives the Pope’s strong words about consumption. We are what the Christian socialist R H Tawney as long ago as 1920 called an ‘Acquisitive Society’, so called because the ‘whole

⁵ Polanyi, K. (1944) *The Great Transformation: the political and economic origins of our time*. Beacon Press, Boston.

⁶ Polanyi, p. 57.

⁷ Sandel, M. (2012) *What Money Can’t Buy; the Moral Limits of Markets*. Allen Lane, London.

tendency and interest and preoccupation is to promote the acquisition of wealth', as opposed to what Tawney called a 'Functional Society', in which money is not an end in itself, but a means to social good and human creativity.

Poverty, which the GWPF paper agrees with the Pope is a major priority, is understood in the Encyclical as a consequence of global inequality and the injustice which flows from it. He speaks of the 'ecological debt' particularly between the global north and south. To the Pope, overconsumption, injustice, unsustainability, inequality, and ecological debt are all part of the picture of a world in which a deified Market sets all the rules, and human values are subordinated to it. That is close to the picture painted by economists such as Joseph Stiglitz⁸, who argues that a largely unregulated market system will tend to accumulate wealth in the hands of the few, and will inevitably foster growing inequality. The 8th century BC Hebrew prophets had quite a lot to say about that, as did Jesus' teaching on neighbour-love.

Science and consensus

The GWPF paper recognizes the majority scientific consensus about climate change on which the Pope basis his arguments. But then they say that 'the majority have often been proved to be wrong', and even speak of 'these scientific uncertainties'. The impression the GWPF paper wishes to give is that climate science is based on theoretical projections, not evidence, that it is not settled, and that there is still room for significant disagreement. They later quote a Royal Society paper to demonstrate 'recent failure to predict climate change with any accuracy'.

It is worth taking time to be very clear what is going on here. The GWPF authors say:

'There are clear grounds for caution [about predictions of climate change] here, given recent failures to predict climate change with any accuracy. A good example is provided by the 2010 publication by the Royal Society [footnote ref.], which was essentially based upon the 2007 IPCC assessment. The Royal Society referred to a range of projected increases in average global temperature based on the current trajectory of carbon dioxide emissions, as between 1.8-7.1 °C. Over short timescales, the Royal Society continued:

The uncertainty in the predicted warming as a result of human activity over the next two decades is smaller, the range being 0.2-0.4 °C per decade.

So far, warming at this rate has not been recorded; indeed there has been no significant trend in average global temperatures during the present century, leading the IPCC to refer to a 'hiatus', perhaps – it is claimed – due to the oceans absorbing more heat than anticipated. Only time will, or can, tell to what extent the IPCC consensus will be verified empirically.'

In fact The Royal Society 2010 paper to which the GWPF authors refer⁹ says rather more than they suggest. It quotes the 2007 IPCC Fourth Assessment Report, whose best estimate in 2007 was that:

'globally-averaged temperatures would be between 2.5 and 4.7 °C higher by 2100 compared to pre-industrial levels. The full range of projected temperature increases by 2100 was found to be 1.8 – 7.1 °C based on the various scenarios and uncertainties in climate sensitivity'. The Royal

⁸ Stiglitz, J.E. (2013) *The Price of Inequality*. Penguin, London.

⁹ The Royal Society (2010) *Climate Change: a Summary of the Science*.

<https://royalsociety.org/policy/publications/2010/climate-change-summary-science/> (accessed 19 August 2015).

Society then further quoted the 2007 IPCC (as the GWPF paper indicates) as saying ‘the uncertainty in the predicted warming as a result of human activity over the next two decades is smaller, the range being 0.2 to 0.4 °C per decade.’ But the Royal Society then go on to say (which the GWPF paper does not quote): ‘On these shorter time-scales, the actual change could however be reduced or enlarged significantly by internal climate variability and natural climate forcings.’

By the next (Fifth) IPCC Assessment Report in 2014 some of the uncertainties had been reduced, and they then reported:

- human influence on the climate is clear;
- warming of the climate system is unequivocal, and since the 1950’s many of the observed changes are unprecedented over decades to millennia;
- the period from 1983 to 2012 was likely the warmest 30-year period of the last 1400 years in the Northern Hemisphere, where such assessment is possible.
- in addition to robust multi-decadal warming, the globally averaged surface temperature exhibits substantial decadal and inter-annual variability. Due to this natural variability, trends based on short records are very sensitive to the beginning and end dates and do not in general reflect long-term climate trends. As one example, the rate of warming over the 15 years 1998-2012 was 0.05 [-0.05-0.15] °C per decade, as it began with a strong El Nino in 1998, and is smaller than the rate calculated between 1951 and 2012 which is 0.12 [0.08-0.14] °C per decade.

This all reads to me as though the Royal Society in 2010 were trying to be very clear about the uncertainties in their predictions (as all good scientists should), and that the IPCC (Fifth Assessment Report) in 2014 were trying to be as careful as they could in assessing the confidence of their own continually updated and refined predictions. For the GWPF authors to describe their selective half-quotation from the 2010 Royal Society Report as demonstrating a ‘failure to predict climate change with any accuracy’ is simply disingenuous.

Of course, all science (indeed all knowledge) deals with probabilities rather than certainties, but most of the time we are sufficiently certain to base most life decisions on the best evidence we have, even though it is necessarily limited.

The GWPF paper queries the Pope’s reference to ‘a disturbing warming of the climatic system’. On the contrary, they say, some warming may actually be rather good for agricultural yields - and they quote an example in Zambia of huge growth in yields of maize. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (AR5: Impacts), acknowledges that a few parts of the world will benefit – at least in the short term - from higher temperatures, but their overwhelming message about damaging current and future impacts of climate change is bleak and urgent. How are we to understand the fact that 2500 world scientists come to one view and the GWPF authors come to such a different one?

One point to which the GWPF paper objects is the description of carbon dioxide as a ‘pollutant’. They refer to the carbon cycle, and to carbon dioxide as part of our natural atmosphere. The Pope does indeed refer to the polluting effects of carbon dioxide alongside other greenhouse gas emissions from the burning of fossil fuels; he does so in the context of a much longer discussion about pollution and toxic waste in our rivers, oceans, industrial outflows and so on. The point is not that - as everyone knows - carbon dioxide is part of the basic economy of life: photosynthesis. It is rather that in the quantities we are now putting into the atmosphere, the results are toxic and damaging. Over many hundreds of thousands of years, according to ice core measurements, carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere have gone up and

down between about 180 and about 280 part per million by volume. The concentration started significantly to rise after the Industrial Revolution and most markedly in recent decades, reaching 400 ppm for the first time in 2013. This is higher than it has ever been during the whole of human civilisation, and is expected to lead to increasingly rapid warming and climate destabilisation. There were rapid changes in climate in human pre-history, with disastrous effects, but during the course of human civilisation the climate has been relatively stable. It is only recently that it has begun to destabilise in a significant way.

The authors also complain that those who question the majority consensus are referred to as ‘deniers’ (‘with unpleasant echoes’, they add, ‘of Holocaust denial’), but the Pope never uses that word: why do they make this point in their response to the Encyclical? What the Pope does say, in relation to the difficulty of seeking concrete solutions to the environmental crisis, partly through powerful opposition and partly through general lack of interest, is this: ‘Obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, can range from denial of the problem of indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions’ (14).

Adaptation

The GWPF paper suggests that the Encyclical hardly refers to the successes of human adaptation to all manner of changing circumstances throughout history. I do not think the Pope uses the word ‘adapt’, but he does say quite a bit about change, and the importance in particular of changing human attitudes.

The IPCC AR5 agrees with the GWPF assessment of the need for adaptation. They acknowledge that people have always tried to adapt to a changing climate, sometimes more successfully than others, and indeed that Governments are working on adaptation plans, but the IPCC also say very clearly that to achieve a ‘climate resilient pathway’ into the future – that is, one that looks to sustainable development – **we need a combination of adaptation and mitigation** to reduce climate change and its impacts.

The GWPF paper endorses the Pope’s concern for the severe poverty found, for example, in parts of Africa, but then says ‘to deny the continent a wider access to cheap fossil fuels and electricity generated by them will only serve to embed that poverty.’ I cannot find any reference in the Encyclical to the Pope suggesting that the developing world should be denied access to cheap energy. What he does say is that the developing world should be encouraged to develop sustainably, and that the richer world should contribute to the costs. Furthermore, ‘cheap energy’ does not only mean ‘cheap fossil fuels’ as the GWPF paper implies. China is discovering at some speed the pollution and damage to air quality caused by fossil fuels, which is why it is investing so seriously in renewable energy. Charities such as SolarAid are developing the provision of solar powered lamps in villages in the developing world. The cheap and sustainable energy needed in the whole world, and especially the developing world, needs much more investment in renewable sources of energy, and in carbon capture and storage - government subsidies for both of which in the UK have been withdrawn in recent years in favour of a dash for gas.

Nuclear energy

The GWPF paper is right to say that the Pope makes only a passing and rather negative reference to nuclear energy. My own view (shared by the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group on Thorium Energy) is that thorium is a much safer nuclear fuel than uranium, and with significantly less polluting waste. Why is not the UK, like several other countries and supported by CERN, investing heavily in thorium research?

Population growth

I believe that the GWPF paper is also right to question the Pope about population growth. The Pope said: ‘While it is true that an unequal distribution of the population and of available resources creates obstacles to development and a sustainable use of the environment, it must nonetheless be recognised that demographic growth is fully compatible with an integral and shared development... To blame population growth instead of extreme and selective consumerism on the part of some is one way of refusing to face the issues’ (para 50). I think the authors are right to draw attention to the weakness of this. It is decreasingly true that demographic growth is compatible with development. But, more importantly, the Pope was widely criticized - rightly from my perspective - for not addressing the issue of voluntary birth control. Many of us wish the Roman Catholic Church were not committed to the view that every ‘marriage act’ should be ‘open to the transmission of life’ (Pope Paul VI, *Humane Vitae*, 1968), but rather understood sexual relationships in the context of a whole life-covenant under God within which human responsibility for planned parenthood is undertaken.

Conclusion

I find their short conclusion the saddest part of the GWPF paper. ‘The Encyclical strikes us as well-meaning but somewhat naïve’. Really?

‘Its gentle idealism longs for a world in which cats no longer chase mice, a world in which species do not kill and eat each other (most do), a world in which species no longer become extinct.’ None of that is in the Encyclical at all. The Pope says nothing about an idealized world in which there are no predators. He is rather drawing attention to the extremely serious loss of biodiversity. That affects the whole balance of nature, which affects the food chain, which affects the wellbeing of all God’s creatures including humanity. There is nothing naïve about that. Of course there have always been extinctions of species, but the current extinction rate is several hundred times that of the natural rate over the course of evolution - and it is largely caused by greedy humans.

‘Much of what [the Pope] recommends in his ‘ecological spirituality’is valuable and commendable. But to regard economic growth as somehow evil, and fossil fuels as pollutants, will only serve to increase the very poverty he seeks to reduce.’ Once again, the Pope nowhere speaks of economic growth as ‘evil’. This is a rhetorical flourish from the minds of the GWPF authors. However, to be as untroubled as they are by the polluting effects of fossil fuels and by the damaging loss of biodiversity suggests that on this point they, and not the Pope, might be properly accused of myopia and unrealism.

The Pope’s conclusion to the Encyclical is much more thrilling: a prayer that God would help us protect all life, and prepare for a better future in the coming of God’s Kingdom of justice, peace, love and beauty. It ends as it begins, addressed to God: ‘Praise be to you’. May God’s Kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven.

Bishop David Atkinson, was formerly Bishop of Thetford (2001-2009), and has been very active on environmental matters in recent years. He was on the Board of Operation Noah, but has now retired from that post.

20th August 2015.