

Prime Meridian

(116) November 20, 2019

Churches, climate and Extinction Rebellion



Service conducted by Anglican priest
Martyn Hawkes during the occupation
of Trafalgar Square, London on Oct.
9, 2019

October 9, 2019: Extinction Rebellion supporters were occupying Trafalgar Square and the road of Whitehall.

There was more than a passing similarity between this secular Extinction Rebellion event and an open-air religious revival meeting. We invite sociologists, anthropologists, theologians and students of modern religious, to explore the implications of Extinction Rebellion, which has grown fast since its formation in 2018.

The presence of St. Martin-in-the-Fields nearby prompts us to ask questions about the response of established churches to the global ecological crisis. St. Martin's history includes a Roman coffin (AD 410; Christian?), a church existing by 1222 and rebuilt by Henry VIII in 1542, when it sat in fields between the Palace of Westminster and London. Its Neoclassical form was created in 1722-1726 by architect James Gibbs 1632-1754).

It remains to be seen how the relationship between the Church of England and the looming threats and opportunities of the 21st Century will unfold.



Editor: Martin Heath.

Faith remains a major force in our society and within the Anglican Church, there is no lack of concern about social justice, including action in response to the threat to communities from environmental change.

The Ecospheres Project and Prime Meridian have been grateful to numerous participants in the Chaplaincy at King's College London, Strand campus. Comprising alumni and present students, they have engaged enthusiastically with our team and their expertises, originality and creativity has been essential in our work. We thank the senior College Chaplain Rev'd Tim Dichfield, whose ethos has enabled this positive association of helpers, co-workers and researchers.

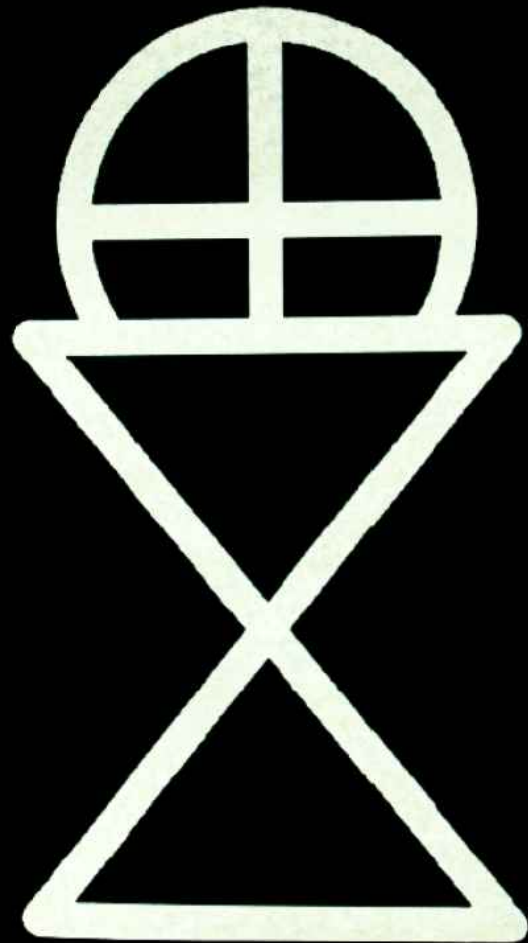


KCL was founded by King George IV (1762-1830) and Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington (1769-1852) in 1829. This Anglican college was created in response to the nearby secular college of University College (founded 1826). KCL's chapel was re-designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott (1811-1878) in 1864. This institution, therefore, has weathered the Victorian Crisis of Faith and it emerged to promote theology alongside world-class science.

This historical preamble reminds us that concern for climate change developed in response to scientific research and the involvement of Christians in this issue is possible only in a society in which faith and science are able to flourish together and not as conflicting world-views.

We cannot talk in all-embracing terms of a "Christian" response to the environment; multiple denominations respond in different ways to the climate emergency. At the core, are discrepancies in cosmology, with fundamentalists dismissing the geological timescale of the Earth in favour of a literal understanding of Genesis, and some churches anticipate an imminent second coming and the re-creation of the universe. One must note that some scientifically literate Christians dissent from the widespread acceptance that our civilisation has caused climate change.

In general terms, however, the Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox and many other churches, recognise human-caused climate problems and commitment to planetary stewardship.





About: Graphic from Christian Climate Action.



On October 9, 2019, after the mid-day service at KCL in the Strand, I accompanied the Rev'd Jenny Morgans (chaplain to the KCL Denmark Hill campus) to Trafalgar Square.

As a climate activist, She had participated in the occupation of the Square and our discussion and her explanation expanded my knowledge of the involvement of Christians in Extinction Rebellion.



CHRISTIAN CLIMATE ACTION

DIRECT ACTION, PUBLIC WITNESS FOR THE CLIMATE



Above: Photo from Christian Climate Action website shows activists building a Noah's Ark.



[Blog - Christian Climate Action](https://christianclimateaction.org/blog/)

<https://christianclimateaction.org/blog/>

As part of the October Rebellion, Christian Climate Action coordinated one of several protest sites in London - the Faith Bridge. This was planned as an occupation of Lambeth Bridge, creating a multi-faith oasis of peace, prayer and worship over the Thames, together with XR Muslims, XR Jews and XR Buddhists.

The Rev'd Jenny Morgans kindly outlined her position in emails:

Christians believe in a creator God. This does not mean a distant God who created the world a long time ago, but a God who creates and recreates, a God who is in our world, in our seasons, in our air and water and wind.

Christians believe in an incarnate God, a God who became human because we are called to be part of God's story, because our earthly bodies are inherently both good and godly.

Christians believe in a God of love and justice. This means a God who draws us into deeper flourishing, and desires justice for all people - especially those who are voiceless or oppressed.

And so, Christians believe in humanity's participation in God's earth, that we are called to be co-creators with God in building a world that enables all to flourish. We are not to be the earth's destroyers, but rather we are to speak truth to power, to pursue peace and build a common life, for all God's creation. That is why I, alongside many other Christians including clergy, are at Extinction Rebellion, to co-create with God and demand a change of direction from this path of destruction.

She added a prayer:

Bless to us O God; sky that is above us, the earth that is beneath us, the days that are before us, the friends that are around us, and your image deep within us. Bless us O God.

The following are some of the organisations and initiatives:

<https://www.greenbelt.org.uk/an-act-of-faith/>

Eco Church <https://ecochurch.arocha.org.uk/>

Creationtide resources: <https://creationtide.com/>

<https://www.churchofengland.org/more/policy-and-thinking/our-views/environment-and-climate-change/creationtide/creationtide>

<https://www.churchofengland.org/environment>

Christian Climate Action <https://christianclimateaction.org/>

Operation Noah <https://operationnoah.org/>

Arocha <https://arocha.org.uk/>

Green Christian <https://greenchristian.org.uk/>

Christian Aid <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/campaigns/climate-change-campaign>

Below: The Bishop of Colchester, Rt Rev'd Roger Morris, was at the Trafalgar Square Extinction Rebellion site. Image from the Christian Climate Action website.





Above: The Bishop of Liverpool, the Rt Rev'd Paul Bayes, joined Christians taking part in London's Extinction Rebellion's protests. Image from the Christian Climate Action website. The website of the Diocese of Liverpool has declared its intention to the cause of ecology. <https://liverpool.anglican.org/EcoDiocese>

Below: Christian Climate Action, from whose website this picture was taken informed its readers that: "A CATHOLIC AND ANGLICAN PRIEST CLIMB ON TOP OF TRAIN DESTINED FOR THE CITY"

The blog reported that: "This morning (Thursday, 17th), two members of Christian Climate Action, the Christian arm of Extinction Rebellion, climbed on top of a train at Shadwell station, stopping a train which was destined for The City. The two were members of clergy - Fr Martin Newell is a 52-year-old Catholic priest from Birmingham and Rev Sue Parfitt is a 77-year-old Anglican priest from Bristol."

We were told also that: "A third member of the group, Phil Kingston, an 83-year-old ex-parole officer, superglued himself to the side of the train. He then knelt down on the station with two other members of the group and they held a prayer vigil."

This kind of event opens a broader discussion about the social phenomenon of climate protest in general and Christian protest in particular. Responses to disruption of public transport has been questioned, indeed, raised anger. An email sent to Christian Climate Action talked of a "misguided actions on the tube station".



Another perspective.

Ultimately, there will be much clinical sociological investigation of Extinction Rebellion. It will be necessary for observers to throw light on the *effectiveness* of the campaign and on the *ethical* issues of protest.

To contribute to that discussion, we include below a response from an observer of the Extinction Rebellion events, which raises questions and represents an alternative view offered from outside that organisation.

I am a member of the Strand chaplaincy. As an ecology and conservation enthusiast, I question the sometimes ethically questionable and hypocritical methods of Extinction Rebellion (XR) activists.

Specifically, the Waterloo Bridge occupation blocked a critical route to St Thomas' Hospital, the only Accident and Emergency (A&E) Department in my area of Southwark and Strand since Guy's Hospital does not have an A&E Department and other north bank A&E Departments are further from the Strand. As a pedestrian on Waterloo Bridge on the day of the protest, I could clearly observe ambulances being forced to divert to nearby bridges already clogged with other diverted traffic. Is it not frankly disgusting for certain churches by Waterloo Bridge to actively play host to such methods and their perpetrators when lives are at stake?

Walking through the occupation that day, I observed copious and indiscriminate use of spray paint, one of the most potent pollutants on par with bleach and turpentine, especially harmful to marine life when eventually run off by rain into rivers and oceans. When questioned about this, a protester shrugged and cavalierly quipped that you can't make an omelette without breaking some eggs before offering me some non-recyclable glossy leaflets and stickers. It does not take one long to realise that history has no end of similar 'for the greater good' statements not only failing to achieve purported ends but ending badly altogether. One questions what environmental 'omelette' such environmentally-unfriendly 'eggs' could logically create. I further find it fascinating that such expendable 'eggs' in XR's arsenal include disrupting environmentally-friendly public transport such as buses and the Underground and how one could possibly square this with an environmentalist mission. Observing the litter left behind the day after the occupation, I wondered how many of these 'activists' have tried first spreading the 'protest' from their own homes, eliminating polluting household products like bleach and resource-hungry materials and crops like cotton and soy respectively, not just red meat (it may surprise them that turning vegan does not solve everything), eliminating food waste, which emits methane, by finishing their plates especially if a food waste bin is out of reach, looking up

www.beatthemicrobead.org/product-lists/

before buying a product or simply replacing bottled soap with bar soap. Further, would it not be more productive to protest before the tangible institutions, such as Oxbridge, investing in fossil fuels, palm oil and the very recreational pollutants used by XR itself, instead of innocent bridges and public-transport commuters?

Perhaps the Christian's struggle in standing up for the environment without hypocrisy while including human life in our care for Creation is best summed up in a parish lunch I attended. My parish priest had talked about how he had rung the church bells at noon in support of the general climate awareness, while eating from a disposable plate with disposable cutlery. The difference between him and the above sort of protesters is that he is most often the first to say sorry and try to act differently and the last to claim righteousness. I invite all Christians including myself to do the same regarding the climate crisis, examining and atoning for our own culpability before blaming an abstract Other, whether 'the Establishment' or 'Society-minus-me', for not doing an abstract and unknown 'Something about it'.

The necessity to act in defence of nature and human communities will become ever more urgent as the 21st Century progresses. There is an undoubted passion and commitment in the Anglicans and many other Churches to respond to ecological issues. However, the ultimate driving force recognising environmental threats and indicating solutions will be scientific research. Our organisation, a multi-disciplinary team of researchers, can assist in the major role of horizon-scanning, identifying potential societal emergencies and the magnitudes and complexities of the dangers ahead.

Prime Meridian.

Prime Meridian is published by the Ecospheres Project, a research and media collaboration. It follows global environmental issues alongside the cycle of the seasons in South East England. It steps back to look at the Earth in its astronomical context and it pursues the search for other habitable worlds.

Editor: Dr Martin J. Heath. Editorial assistance: Penelope Stanford and Dr Laurance R. Doyle.

Collaboration associates: Kelly ben-Maimon, Palash Dave, Lienkie Diedericks, Laura Elworthy, Elizabeth Gornall, Shaheen Komatsu and Veronica Mariquoe.

Email: prime-meridian01@hotmail.com

Website: www.ecospheresproject.org

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