Opinion & Analysis

Religion must evolve to lead us to ecological salvation

JOHN GIBBONS

Irish bishops' climate change letter scores well in placing humanity in a complex, fragile and valuable web of life

UN SECRETARY general Ban Ki-moon last week urged religious groups to "provoke, challenge and inspire political leaders into acting more boldly" on the rapidly advancing climate threat. The major faith groups have real power, he pointed out. They control half the world's schools (and far more than half in Ireland); they are the world's third largest category of investors; and they produce more publications than the entire secular press in the EU.

And, more importantly, since they don't have to run the gauntlet of being elected every couple of years, religious leaders are free to tell the public unpalatable truths from which politicians so often run scared.

"Your potential impact is enormous," said the UN chief. "You are the leaders who can have the longest, widest, deepest reach." His point is echoed by Al Gore, whose new book, *Our Choice: A Plan to Solve the Climate Crisis* acknowledges that simply laying out the facts is failing to get through. To be effective, the message must also appeal to people's sense of spiritual and moral duty of care.

The Irish hierarchy has reportedly been working for the last two and a half years in developing a position on climate change. Finally, and barely three weeks ahead of the Copenhagen conference, the fruits of this labour were delivered this week as *The Cry of the Earth*, the Catholic bishops' pastoral letter on climate change.

The document has much to recommend it, although perhaps its greatest achievement is in getting published at all, given the bloody-minded indifference to environmental warnings among a powerful rump in the hierarchy.

It scores well on social justice, particularly between the rich (polluting) world and the poor who must first bear the cost. Ireland's disastrous 130 per cent increase in transport sector emissions between 1990 and 2007 is rightly chided. So too are the lax building and planning regulations up until 2008 that made it profitable for builders to lash up a chaotic sprawl of poorly insulated housing.

Cynics might well note that the bishops had precious little to say while this unsustainable binge was in full swing. Columban missionary and theologian Fr Seán McDonagh is acutely aware of this, and disappointed that this pastoral letter, for instance, failed to recommend a reduction in meat consumption.

Despite these and other misgivings, overall McDonagh is happy that the bishops have thrown their red cap into the environmental ring, an issue he has campaigned on for three decades, having witnessed the devastating effects of deforestation in the Third World.

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Clerical ambivalence is never, however, far beneath the surface. In the foreword, Cardinal Seán Brady alludes to "potentially negative consequences" and "plausible links", while also nodding to climate sceptics. McDonagh told me he was unhappy with the tone of the cardinal's introduction, adding: "I felt he shouldn't have said that."

Several allusions to the Book of Genesis are made in *The Cry of the Earth*. Man's role as a steward of nature is emphasised, but the quote from Genesis which explicitly sets out our divinely ordained right to plunder the natural world is omitted entirely: "The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the Earth . . . upon all that moveth upon the Earth, and upon the fishes of the sea; into your hands are they delivered."

Christian teaching has long placed man separate and superior to nature. This has had disastrous consequences, first for nature and now for humanity. To its credit, the pastoral letter genuinely tries to nudge the focus from being utterly human-centric and towards placing our existence within a complex, fragile and intrinsically valuable web of life. Destroy that web, and we commit to our own extinction.

"Man's dominion is not a licence to treat the Earth as a quarry," is how McDonagh puts it. More powerful than any religion, he believes, is the myth of progress. "The elephant in the [secular] room is economics. On the Christian side, it's about not taking the Earth seriously."

Back in 2007, there were strong signals that Pope Benedict XVI had overcome traditional Vatican scepticism as well as suspicion about "godless" environmentalism and was in favour of an aggressive ecological stance. "There is no longer a schism," is how one analyst put it. Since then, the green glow appears to have cooled. Earlier this year, the papal encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, emphasised human stewardship and our responsibility towards creation.

However, it ignores entirely the overwhelming environmental issue of runaway global population growth, bizarrely fretting instead about the dangers of under-population.

"Doing God's work" means different things to different people.

The chief executive of Goldman Sachs boasted this week that it's about outlandish profits and massive bonuses. The firm was bailed out by the Obama administration just 12 months ago and is once again spooning out millions to senior staff.

Goldman Sachs chairman Peter Sutherland might feel he too is doing God's work.

Just last year Pope Benedict awarded the former Irish attorney general the Order of St Gregory the Great for his "expert financial advice" to the Vatican. Other recent recipients of this papal honour include Conrad Black (currently in prison for fraud) and tycoon Rupert Murdoch.

The moral imperative of speaking truth to power has never been more pressing nor, it sometimes seems, more improbable.

John Gibbons blogs at www.thinkorswim.ie