

Reflection for Equinox March 21<sup>st</sup> 2010  
Unitarian Church of Calgary  
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“The Theology of Climate Change as a Moral Issue”

Long ago and far away, on a beautiful summer’s day, the course training officer approached me with such a deal. We, the duty watch, could spend Sunday alongside the floats, sunk into routine. Or we could let go all lines and head up Burrard Inlet with some navigation trainees who needed remedial time on task and just happened to be on duty watch that day. Such a deal!

And as it was Sunday, near a waterfall at the head of the inlet we took our Sabbath. We stopped and drifted. We hoisted the church pennant—a tapering flag, flown on high—to signal that divine service was underway.

Tradition dates the church pennant to the Anglo-Dutch Wars of the mid-1600s. This pennant combines the English cross of Saint George with the red, white and blue stripes of the Nederlanders. When the church pennant is flown, hostilities cease.

And so we stopped the vessel and were quiet for a time. I read from Psalm 104:

The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted. In them the birds build their nests; the stork has its home in the fir trees. The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the coney. .... Yonder is the sea, great and wide.....

(Psalm 104, vv 16-26. NRSV)

As we drifted in the fjord there, we engaged the theological underpinnings that sustain us as moral beings.

We looked to tradition when we raised our church pennant and stopped to observe the Sabbath, even on a vessel at sea.

We looked to scripture for words to describe our human yearning for the holy.

We looked to reason, as we each interpreted the moment for ourselves.

We looked to experience—the personal experience of the holy—that so many find in stillness and in nature.

I believe such times as that moment at sea shape our theology and our choices as moral beings.

I believe this sense of our essential connection to the universe helps shape our conduct and the ethical principles by which we choose between right and wrong, between good and bad behaviour.

Tradition, scripture, reason, and experience provide us with a storehouse of such moments. For example:

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

(Matthew 6:28-29. NRSV)

Suppose you are mindful of these words, and you walk in the mountains amid spring flowers, and feel moved to respect and reverence. This is theology. And this theology may call you, may move you, to tread lightly upon the earth.

For example, when I sign up for the vegetarian option at a conference, that choice is a moral response inspired by my theology. If I make a donation to the Land Conservancy each time I fly, that is a moral response inspired by my theology.

As a Unitarian I recognize no limit to revelation; I include as scripture the writings of our great scientists, such as Charles Darwin's "Origin of Species". Darwin wrote:

It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, ... dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us—[the laws of Natural Selection]. ..... There is grandeur in this view of life.... [that] from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.

(Charles Darwin words, last paragraph of Chapter 14, "The Origin of Species". On line.)

This too is theology.

A similar insight came to Albert Schweitzer, observing the great hippos as his vessel laboured upstream and he laboured to name the essential link for his system of ethics, and found it there on the river—reverence for life.

Last October several members of this congregation attended an ecumenical retreat at the University of Calgary on climate change viewed as a moral issue.

The overwhelming weight of peer-reviewed scientific opinion is clear: climate change is real, and an imminent threat to life on the planet.

Even if climate change were not a pressing issue, it would still be a moral issue.

We recognize the inherent worth and dignity of other beings. Let us also recognize an inherent worth in forests and mountains and great waters, for their own sake.

In conclusion, I believe that climate change is a moral issue. My theology leads me to respond with respect and reverence, and with renewed vigour.

As has been written, we see set before us life and death; let us choose life.

(Deuteronomy 30:15-19)

## Bibliography

Albert Schweitzer, "Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography", translated by A.B. Lemke. New York, 1933, 1949, 1990. Available through the Calgary Public Library, catalogued as 362.1092 SCH S 1990.

Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), 1989.