

Our polite evasion is a threat to survival

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Cognitive dissonance about global warming is a luxury that only the privileged can afford, argues *Katie Cross*



I USED to attend a church at which the leader of the Eco Group collected and drove classic cars. He and his fleet were often the subject of light-hearted banter among the congregation. “Isn’t it funny,” they’d say to one another. “The most environmentally minded person in the congregation arrives at church in a different car every week!”

His extreme cognitive dissonance was never once challenged by the congregation or, indeed, by the content of church services. This man was able to label himself public as a Christian *and* a climate activist *and* a collector of classic cars, without a hint of irony.

It is possible that this man, and other members of the congregation, were suffering from “climate anxiety”. In the wake of the recent IPCC report (News, 13 August), and in the year of the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26), the climate crisis has been a regular fixture in news headlines and in theological discussions.

At the recent British and Irish Association of Practical Theology (BIAPT) conference, delegates focused on “ecotheology”: the interrelationship between religion and nature. One (among many) issues raised was the dissonance between theological thought and action on climate change, and the anxiety that this can provoke.

PSYCHOLOGISTS say that “climate anxiety” often emerges among those working towards sustainability, and can present in feelings of helplessness and grief. Anxiety is certainly a rational response to such an overwhelming issue, particularly for climate activists. But, for those such as our Eco Group leader and his fleet of classic cars, climate anxiety is more of an attachment to the material, to consumption, and to that which keeps us comfortable.

It is for this reason that the Professor of Environmental Studies at Humboldt State University, Sarah Jaquette Ray, argues that climate anxiety is an “overwhelmingly white phenomenon”. For Ray, privileged progressives subconsciously view climate change as a set of inconveniences that challenge their way of life. Their aim is not to liberate marginalised communities who have been disproportionately experiencing the threats of climate change, but to ensure the preservation of the comforts of their own privilege.

Therein lies a particular problem for predominantly white churches and their response to the climate crisis: how to care for those experiencing climate anxiety, while also maintaining accountability and challenging attachment to comfort and consumption.

Church and parachurch organisations have been particularly action-driven in the fight against climate change. In the lead-up to COP26, there have been carbon pledges, prayer chains, and special climate services. Some denominations have disinvested from fossil fuels (News, 21 May).

Yet, while Churches are able to engage in the important, prophetic work of holding governments and industries to account in the public square, there remains a lack of accountability in the pews. Perhaps this is because climate anxiety over the loss of privilege is more common than we have realised. This is often compounded by church leaders, who stay silent on local and individual contributions to climate change to avoid conflict.

This has never been an acceptable state of affairs. In the wake of the IPCC report and many others like it, comfortable silence can no longer be an option. Polite evasion is still evasion.

THERE are ways to challenge this. We first need to consider the nature of our attention. Yearly climate-themed services will no longer raise awareness quickly enough.

The situation is urgent, with the IPCC warning that the 1.5°C goal for limiting global heating is slipping beyond reach. Because of this, we cannot speak about climate change only when it is a featured news headline. These discussions need to become the focal point of our regular worship and liturgy (Features, 4 December 2020).

We should not fear that a focus on climate change will result in a single-issue Church. Climate change is a multi-faceted and intersectional concern, which cannot be separated from the other social disparities which it creates and exacerbates. To speak of climate change is to raise awareness of the way in which it disproportionately affects those facing multiple inequalities of income, race, gender, and disability. To prioritise the theme of climate change in our worship is to centre the most marginalised in our world — those whom Christians are called to care for first.

Many of us benefit from systems of privilege which allow us the luxury of cognitive dissonance. Climate change is reduced to an unfortunate headline, a well-worn news story, or a passing comment about the weather. But Christians are called to more radical action. We must persist in challenging our own comfortability. Cognitive dissonance and polite evasion are not harmless: unless challenged, they threaten the very future of our planet.

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This article is based on papers and discussions at the recent BIAPT conference biapt.org