



Addressing Tipping Points for a Precarious Future

Timothy O'Riordan and Timothy Lenton

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Commentary 5.2

Faith and Tipping Points

David Atkinson

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[-] Abstract and Keywords

Responding to the onset of tipping points evokes a combination of fear, bravado, greed, wonder, and worship. The Christian ethos bestows responsibility and care upon the human conscience and behaviour, widening the perspective to compassion, to living for sufficiency, and to sharing burdens. In tipping points there can be hope without fear so long as the ethics are firmly but respectfully in place.

Keywords: tipping points, Christian values, meditative reflection, wonder, worship

There is an episode of *Yes Minister* in which Jim Hacker is discussing a document with Bernard: 'I know what it says ... what does it mean?' He knew the facts; he did not have a narrative of meaning in which to locate them. The same is often true about climate change. The scientific consensus is increasingly confident on many of the basic facts, for all the many remaining uncertainties. But what do they mean? What story shall we tell in order to respond to them?

As the authors of these chapters and commentaries explain, the language of 'tipping points' can be used as a metaphor for interpreting uncertainty, complexity, unpredictability. And one of the ways the metaphor is used is through narrative, the art of storytelling. There are a number of stories being told in response to the questions posed for us by 'potentially convulsive' climate change. Questions about our relationship to the planet and to each other; about altruism and selfishness; about whether we are able to overcome mistrust and develop global cooperation; about the place of technology in causing and perhaps solving our problems. There are other questions about the nature of our primary values, hopes and goals; about whether it is possible to live sustainably within planetary limits; about how we should seek justice, especially for the most disadvantaged parts of the Earth; about our obligations to the future; about how we think about human life and destiny, cope with uncertainties; and about our vulnerabilities, hopes, and

fears. There are moral dimensions – and, I would argue, spiritual dimensions – to each of these questions.

A number of narratives are being formulated in response. One is about management. The Earth is resilient; we can therefore exploit it as much as we need for our own good. Resource depletion is not something to be anxious about – technological discovery has always come to our aid in the past.

(p.166) Another is about fear. The Earth system is actually very fragile and sensitive to climate and other change. We must be very worried about what we are doing to the planet. Be afraid: be very afraid.

There is a third narrative that we could say is about greed. We are a market-led society in which something called ‘the market’ rules. Finance trumps every other value. Everything, including the environment, becomes a commodity to be desired. The myth of limitless economic growth is a primary driver of climate disruption.

Alongside these, other narratives are being prepared by religious people and communities, narratives which have something fresh and potentially more creative to offer. The narrative of the Christian story (which is where I locate myself) is not about our management of the world: but about wonder and worship and recognizing that the whole created order comes to us as gift. There is *sacredness* about God’s world, in which we can delight, but which requires the acknowledgement of more – much more – than a technical fix.

The Christian story is not about fear, but about a community discovering what it means to live in freedom. It is about a narrative which begins in God’s creative love for the world, and ends in God’s ‘kingdom’ of justice, which is the whole of creation healed. This is the basis for living in hope. Within this narrative, humanity has a special role under God for the cherishing and protection of the planet and for the well-being of all creatures with which we are interdependent. It is a story about the growth of a community marked by neighbour love and justice, especially for the most disadvantaged. It is not about the autonomy which destroys any sense of community and makes everything into a commodity. It is rather a story about mutual cooperation and responsibility in place of fear. It recognizes human and planetary values which cannot be reduced to a price – such as friendship and loyalty, creative work, beauty, and love.

The Christian narrative of the human experience and our place in the created order is not therefore about greed, but about gratitude for gift, shown in self-giving, respect, and compassionate concern for the well-being of others, for ‘the flourishing of innate and learned qualities of virtue and goodness, and for the empathy of compassion and solidarity’.

The retelling of this story is what Christian liturgy is about, including space for meditative reflection on ‘what it means’ – ‘visualizing new horizons’. Such stories and liturgies are not unique to the Christian tradition. Many faith communities, focused in worship, are called to express their community life in service for others and for the planet. And this has **(p.167)** given rise to a host of small-scale local initiatives, based around churches, mosques, temples, or synagogues, in which people are trying to live more simply, more responsibly, and more aware of the possible ‘convulsions’ of tipping points on the horizon.

For example, the ‘Sabbath’ principle is about recognizing the rhythms of the Earth, and about living with sufficiency. The biblical concept of ‘jubilee’ supported the Jubilee 2000 campaign

about reducing international debt. The Church of England, with its buildings, schools, land, offices, and numerous community initiatives, promotes a 'Shrinking the Footprint Campaign' to reduce carbon emissions, and a Seven Year Plan for environmental responsibility. Christian agencies such as Christian Aid and Tearfund see that their development agenda needs to be woven into the environmental agenda. Climate change is described by such organizations as an issue of justice. Many Christians are involved in the Transition Town movement. There are a variety of Christian-based organizations (A Rocha, Christian Ecology Link, Eco-congregations, Operation Noah) working at the practice of a Christian ecology. The John Ray Initiative promotes scholarly and practical engagement between environmental science and religion. Archbishop Rowan Williams, when he was Archbishop of Canterbury, among others, has promoted significant inter-faith dialogue on the environment.

So faith communities are among many others working for what Tim O'Riordan calls (in drafts for this volume) 'the beneficial outcomes of new states of living and valuing betterment for all, such as in health, security, in manageable scales of living and communicating, and of forming economic relationships on the local rather than the multinational scale'. They contribute to the myriad of 'good news' stories we are urged to listen to, and in some places are becoming small, fresh 'islands of transformation'. Maybe they could even become benign cultural and social 'tipping points' themselves. **(p.168)**

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