

**The Unity of Christians:  
The Vision of Paul Couturier**

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**XV**

**Spiritual Ecumenism Restoring The Environment : A Rocha  
Living Waterways**

*Dave Bookless*

Fifty years after the death of Abbé Paul Couturier, it is a pleasure and privilege to be here to celebrate his vision of reconciliation and unity for all Christians and, through us, for the whole world. But the context of today's meeting is poignant. Nearby us, 500,000 people are marching for peace under blue skies, whilst millions face war under a cloud of fear and dust in Iraq. So, if Christians are to have anything to say about 'peace' to a world in conflict, then we must put our own house in order first – peace begins at home.

Also, I find myself in an interesting situation. From Evangelical Anglican background, I was brought up to be suspicious of 'ecumenism' as an end in itself, to see it as a watering down of truth in order to gain consensus. Yet, now I find myself working across a full range of denominations and, increasingly, also working in an interfaith situation – in partnership with Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus.

The reason behind this pilgrimage lies in a rediscovery of the theology of creation, and the praxis of creation care (or environmental stewardship). Traditionally, Protestantism - especially at the evangelical end of the spectrum - has been built around a fall/redemption paradigm. In recent years, many have tried to recover a fuller doctrine of creation. For some, such as Matthew Fox, this has led to a rejection of the traditional theological pillars of fall and redemption, and their replacement by a

holistic and evolutionary philosophy that sees humanity gradually improving and becoming more spiritually aware, more in harmony with other species.

Global events today, and throughout the last century, show how naïve this view actually is. Humanity may have achieved huge technological and scientific strides, but human nature remains as fallen as ever. The capacity for evil remains undiminished. Twenty-first century humanity still stands in need of redemption from itself.

Yet whilst I, along with many across all the major Christian traditions, would want to hold on to the need for doctrines of fall and redemption, it is also possible to observe a major paradigm shift in Christian thinking – particularly amongst those, such as myself, from an evangelical Protestant background. Creation has been restored to its proper place. There has been a re-examination of the biblical evidence, of the views of patristic scholars, the reformers and of Christians in other cultures. There has also been a spontaneous movement around the world, of Christians becoming aware of our responsibility as stewards of the earth, to do something about the environmental crisis.

It is now being recognised that creation, rather than simply being an irrelevant prefix to the drama of fall and redemption, is actually the context for that drama. Creation and its corollary of ‘new creation’ are the bookends within which fall and redemption make sense. A healthy theology of Creation provides us with a number of key attitudes and imperatives, each of which have major implications for ecumenism: the common ground on which all human beings stand – that equally we are made of the dust, and equally we are made in the image of God. This unity to humanity predates and subsumes the divisions caused by sin and the fall, and gives us the grounds for building a humanity united on a doctrine of God’s loving and saving action towards all people. It arises out of the place that human beings have as part of the created order - we are Adam; we are of the earth, earthy; we are a carbon-based life-form; we are of the stuff from which everything else is also made. From this in turn arises our sense of community with all living things, that we are all part of the one earth-community. This growing realisation gives rise to the practical obligation upon us of creation care. Genesis 1.26-28 places us in the scheme of Creation as imaging God in servant kingship – God’s blessing that gives us our power over it is so that we may tend it to render it fruitful, to enrich it, not deplete it. Again, in the second Creation

narrative, Genesis 2.15, God charges Adam to till and keep the garden of Eden, in other words to serve and preserve, to tend and care for it. These are creation ordinances, recognised in and incumbent upon all faiths. This is the theory. What about the praxis?

A Rocha is an international conservation organisation working to show God's love for all creation through practical local projects. In England the main project is the recovery of derelict industrial land in Southall, west London. Set between two waterways, we are transforming it into part-nature reserve, a place of beauty for the local community to enjoy, and also a place of spiritual restoration before the beauty of Creation and its Creator. At the heart of the project live a Christian community, exemplifying in a shared life and all the practical work how to realise the spiritual aims of peace, unity, and living in accordance with the will of God for the world's environment, trusting and obeying, waiting on his grace, and witnessing to his presence in his Creation. A Rocha achieves this through five key characteristics.

- *Christian faith and practice*

We are distinctively Christian – uncompromising in our worship, and our belief that in Christ all things will be made new. It is Christ that gives us hope for the world – our work serves to bring out those words of the Lord's Prayer to his Father that represent his concern for his Creation: may his Kingdom, his will be done 'on earth' as in heaven. But we are not denominational in our Christianity. Our bi-monthly prayer meeting in Southall brings together Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Roman Catholic, Quaker, New Church, Black-led churches, and Pentecostal friends – consistently more people and more representative than the local Churches Together group – largely because the focus is on practical local issues, not on church politics and negotiation.

- *Conservation*

We undertake practical conservation and do not just talk about it! The 'Living Waterways' project has involved us in scrub clearance, bird ringing, tree planting and many more pieces of work. This gives wonderful opportunities for building relationships as you work alongside each other in the community; it is not just

having dialogue in the abstract. I discovered this through work in Bradford in interfaith education, and again in Southall while we were decorating my vicarage! – it is practical tasks undertaken together, not discussion and dialogue, that build relationships and overcome prejudice.

- *Community*

We emphasise building community, both amongst the team and the scores of volunteers – sharing food, sharing tasks, sharing accommodation. It is vitally important to what A Rocha does that it has this strong centre for Christian community. It does not operate on a ‘rule’ of life, but as an evolving relational community. There are real rough edges and so the sharing is genuine! Also we feel that, as with Christ, the work of A Rocha should be an authentic incarnation in a local community, getting involved in local issues, letting the local people set the agenda.

- *Cross-cultural*

We are strongly cross-cultural. The Christian church can envisage itself - in terms of the needs of the world, in terms that the world could currently relate to - as a worldwide multicultural NGO (non-governmental organisation). A Rocha is now in twelve countries – Portugal, France, Lebanon, Kenya, UK, Canada, USA, Bulgaria, Finland, Netherlands, India. At our ‘Team-leaders Conferences’ it is evident we do not rely on a euro-centric worldview – we learning from Syrian and Lebanese Christians and cultures, from India the Mar Thoma Christians, and so on. In Southall, a strongly Indian, multicultural part of London, this learning about our own faith through and from the lights of others is gradually changing the face of conservation (my daughters have little time for western pop and dance - they are into Bollywood!)

- *Co-operation*

We work in co-operation with those of all faiths and none. We have no fear of engagement and practical co-existence with people of other faiths, for we see that all people are created together by God. We have been very much involved in bringing to birth the Faith Leaders’ Pledge’, now signed by the major faith

leaders and Christian denominations active in Southall. Coincidentally it has a good deal in common with Paul Couturier's vision of different cultures and beliefs recognising the image of God in one another, walking and working together, overcoming old enmities, forging new bonds of friendship and answering the call of God to draw near to him and be one with him in peace and in love.

*As representatives of the religious communities of Southall and Hayes, we:*

*Express our deep conviction* that religious and ethical values are vital in addressing the environmental challenges facing humanity both globally and locally;

*Acknowledge* that members of our faiths have often contributed to the poor state of the local environment and have rarely practised the true teachings of our faiths;

*Commit ourselves* to educate our respective communities and followers on the environmental content of our religion with a view to promoting environmentally responsible behaviour;

*Commit ourselves*, to promote practices that are in accordance with our religious beliefs and based on respect for life and the need to live in harmony with nature.

A Rocha, and its Living Waterways project, does not have all the answers. There is a long way still to go, but it is, I feel, a wonderful example of how a rediscovery of the theology of creation, and the praxis of creation-care, can make a real difference to ecumenical and interfaith relations at the local where they count.

*The Revd Dave Bookless is an Anglican priest and director of A Rocha UK. This address was given at the Westminster conference in March 2003.*