

# Finding a Myth for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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I.

Thank you very much for the invitation to be with you here today.

I'm going to start with a story – my own story, actually. It's the story of how I went from working as a policy wonk, a special adviser in Tony Blair's government, to a rather different place: the belief that a 3,000 year old set of myths about covenant, atonement and renewal are actually profoundly relevant to our current moment of crisis and transition – and might even have the potential to succeed where our politics seem to be failing so miserably.

But let me begin at a specific moment: the moment when I lost my faith. It was 2011. I was in a small room at the headquarters of the United Nations in New York. Around the table in front of me were arrayed two dozen prime ministers, presidents, foreign ministers, and ambassadors, from the United States, the EU, China, Brazil, and so on.

It was the final meeting of the UN's High Level Panel on Global Sustainability – a body that had been set up by the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, to put together an agenda for the 2012 Rio summit on sustainable development due to take place the following year.

I was there as the report's writer: the person charged with finding the right words to reflect the collective sentiments, visions and aspirations of the Panel's members.

It was my dream job.

Until 2006, I'd been Special Adviser for Hilary Benn, Britain's Secretary of State for International Development. I'd loved working for Hilary, but also felt a constant tug towards working at the global level.

I felt a persistent conviction that it was *there* that solutions to problems like climate change, extreme poverty, or global inequality were to be found.

I knew that the Bush Administration would soon be gone; that a massive rebalancing of global power was underway; and that awareness of interconnectedness and interdependence was growing all the time.

And it seemed to me that the world might be about to reach some kind of tipping point – a decisive shift towards cooperation, collective action, and reform of global governance to upgrade it for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. That was what I thought.

So, in 2006, I left my job at DFID, and became a research fellow at the Center on International Cooperation, a foreign policy think tank at New York University.

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And it was exhilarating.

Almost as soon as I'd started, I found myself seconded to the UN Secretary-General's office to help organise a head of government level climate summit. This was straight after Hurricane Katrina and *An Inconvenient Truth*, and you could *feel* the mood of purpose and resolve on the 38<sup>th</sup> floor of the UN, and the sense of momentum towards the Copenhagen climate summit that was due to take place two years later.

When the financial crisis, together with the combined fuel and food price spike, hit a year or so later, in 2008 – just as Barack Obama became the Democratic candidate – it seemed only to increase the sense of a moment of possibility at which real change was within reach.

True, the abject failure of the Copenhagen climate summit in 2009 dented my enthusiasm a bit.

But in another way, I saw its failure as vindication of something that I'd been arguing for a long time: that if we wanted to get better at managing the hardest global issues, then we needed to face up to the massive issues of equity and fairness involved, rather than forever sweeping them under the carpet.

I wasn't just thinking about the fact that it's always poor people who are the first casualties of climate change or environmental degradation.

Even more fundamentally, I had in mind the question of who gets to consume what at the point when the global economy starts hitting its environmental limits.

After all, as we've been discussing here at this conference, the single biggest challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the speed with which human activity is approaching a whole host of 'planetary boundaries'.

Not just limits to the atmosphere's ability to absorb our emissions, but limits also to fresh water use, or how much land is available, or how much biodiversity loss the earth can cope with, or how much our oceans can acidify before they start to reach irreversible tipping points, and so on.

In such circumstances, questions of fair shares become unavoidable – because as Gandhi put it, "there is enough for everyone's need, but not for everyone's greed".

And the example par excellence, of course, is climate change – where solving the problem means figuring out how to share a finite global emissions budget out between 7 billion people.

I was only too aware, after Copenhagen, that this was just the latest in a very long line of UN talks that had studiously ignored that basic truth.

So it felt like everything I'd been waiting for when, amid the ashes of the Copenhagen summit, Ban Ki-moon announced the creation of what would become the UN High Level Panel on Global Sustainability, to come up with a new way forward; and all the more so when I was asked to come on board as the Panel's writer.

Which brings me back to that room at UN headquarters, that autumn afternoon in 2011 – losing my faith.

What I'd hoped I'd see was a Panel that would rise above the endless bickering of G8s, G20s, G77s, and the rest, and start to think and act like a "G One": a group, in other words, that would recognise that we all live on one planet, and need to act accordingly.

What I *actually* saw that day was an illustration of what has been called the “G Zero”: a world in which *no* leaders are really prepared to think beyond their national interests, or show vision on tough global issues.

As the last vestiges of my naivety fell away, it dawned on me that far from engaging with the big issues of fairness in conditions of environmental limits, the High Level Panel would in fact barely be willing to acknowledge the existence of any natural limits in the first place.

And, amid the disappointment and disillusionment, I lost my faith.

Not in God, you understand, but in something I’d given much more of my life to: the conviction that rational arguments, backed up by well-presented evidence, would be enough to persuade politicians of the case for the radical actions needed to build a fairer and more sustainable world.

All of which made me wonder: if evidence and rational arguments aren’t enough, then what is?

II.

I’ve thought about that question a lot since that day in 2011. And there are three reflections I keep coming back to.

The first is the realisation that although these issues are global challenges, it’s in the west that there’s most to be done. It’s *us* that have by far the greatest per capita environmental impact. And it’s *our* governments that still have the greatest capacity to set global agendas.

Second, having worked in the war room of a Labour general election campaign HQ, I can report that whatever else we might say about politicians, they do care what you and I think – obsessively so. And they understand that we, their publics, are not yet serious about sustainability. Not really.

Instead, they get that public attitudes, especially in the west, are skewed towards short rather than long term outlooks.

Towards seeing wellbeing in a primarily material sense, rather than more broadly.

And above all, towards thinking in terms of “I” rather than “we” – or, at best, in terms of an “us” that’s a great deal smaller than 7 billion.

And the problem with that, as our interdependence continues to grow and we approach environmental limits faster than ever, is that only a 7 billion “us” is going to suffice.

Which means, third, that the key battles for the sort of world we want in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will not take place in Cabinet rooms, or Parliaments, or the corridors of the UN. Rather, they’ll take place inside each of us, at the level of values, mind-sets, and the ‘deeper stories’ that publics and politicians alike use to make sense of the world.

And the more I’ve thought about these deeper stories, the more I’ve realised that we have a serious deficit of them, especially in the west.

Instead, I think we have what the writer Jonah Sachs has called a “myth gap”.

For four centuries now, and especially over the last few decades, we've been charging ahead on advances in science, innovation, and technology – but with less and less of a sense of where we're trying to get to.

We've largely dismantled organised religion, but have failed to put anything much in its place.

We've turbocharged our *logos*, but at the price of much of our *mythos*.

And my suspicion is that this myth gap is a significant part of what lies at the root of a lot of our contemporary problems – including environmental ones.

I think that our lack of answers to questions of meaning, belonging, and human purpose, together with the debilitating belief that we inhabit a universe that's similarly purposeless, leads us towards a wholly understandable desire to *escape*.

Sometimes it's entertainment, tabloids, celebrity culture; sometimes it's addiction; a lot of the time it's just *stuff* – the gadgets, clothes, appliances, ideal homes and so on of a consumer society suffering from attention deficit disorder. And of course the latter form of escapism is especially significant from an environmental point of view.

The irony, as opinion polls show, is that despite having all this stuff, we're becoming less and less sure that the future will actually be better than the past. Instead, we're discovering that the way we live and organise our economy is increasingly creating new risks – financial, social, environmental and so on.

And we're also watching the death throes of the old worldview. In science, the mechanistic paradigm is being challenged by emerging findings in fields from physics to ecology and cosmology. The notion of the purely rational, self-interested individual is coming under heavy fire in fields from psychology to behavioural economics. Old forms of governance are increasingly untrusted, or unfit for purpose when faced with the complexity of 21<sup>st</sup> century issues.

But while we may be witnessing the decline of the old, the new remains for now indistinct. And it also remains to be seen whether it will take shape in time, given how much the clock is ticking on environmental trends.

So the question remains: if my intuition is right – that we have to bridge this 'myth gap' to make it safely to the other side of the immense transition that we're embarking on – then what might that look like?

III.

My hunch, as I'll set out, is that the Eternal Covenant that we've been discussing at this conference has the potential to prove hugely important here.

But before we get onto the big picture, about a civilisation in transition, let me set out briefly why I personally find this area of theology so resonant.

I first became aware of the eternal covenant in 2006, having been pointed towards Margaret Barker's work on temple theology by Richard Chartres at a point when I was grappling with questions of my own about faith, meaning, and purpose in the world.

And I was intrigued to discover that the eternal covenant – also called the covenant of peace, or creation covenant – was the very first covenant in the Old Testament, prior to those with Abraham, Moses, or David. I didn't recall being taught that at school, or in my confirmation classes.

I was fascinated to learn that unlike the other Old Testament covenants, this one was concerned with how to maintain the stability and harmony of creation – and that this state of balance and wholeness could be breached through human sin, in turn leading to an 'unravelling' of creation.

This too was news to me – as was the idea that atonement, a concept I was familiar with from the New Testament, was all about preventing this from happening, by restoring the covenant and bringing creation back into balance.

Nor had I realised the centrality to all this of Wisdom – a sacred form of knowledge and vision, indivisible from justice, kindness, and righteousness, and powerfully linked to the feminine aspect of the divine.

Or that the high priests of the first temple gained access to Wisdom through being anointed on their heads and eyelids with a sacred anointing oil kept in the Holy of Holies – a process of *theosis*, through which they became angelic, and of resurrection that was, as Margaret puts it, “not a post-mortem experience”.

Or that when I had been baptised at birth, I too had been welcomed into this three thousand year old tradition.

I found these ideas utterly compelling.

I loved the fact that this was both a profoundly mystical vision *and* one that was deeply concerned with what happens in the here and now. (As Margaret observes in one of her books, “the temple mystics were messengers from heaven to earth; their vision was not just a private ecstasy, but always a call to be the bearer of revelation”.)

And I also loved the sense that emerges from Margaret's writing that the eternal covenant is in a way the central story arc of the whole Bible, from Genesis through to Revelation.

At one end, Adam is understood as the original high priest charged with “tilling and keeping” creation; Eden represents creation in a state of balance and harmony; and the Fall is the archetypal breach of the covenant through abuse of knowledge.

When Jesus arrives, as Margaret emphasises, he is understood by his followers as the returning Great High Priest, come to make atonement through his self-sacrifice, and in so doing restore the broken covenant. And then his Ascension: the reversal of the Fall from Eden, symbolising Adam restored to his intended place above the angels.

Finally, at the end of the Bible, Revelation too can be understood in terms of a covenant broken, atoned for, and restored – bringing the Kingdom and the New Jerusalem to earth.

Above all, I loved the fact that all this was so burningly relevant to the issues I was grappling with in my work – the very same issues that the UN High Level Panel on Global Sustainability proved so incapable of dealing with.

For one thing, as we've been discussing over the last couple of days, the modern concept of the environment is central to the eternal covenant.

The covenant, after all, is *all* about humans' relation to Creation. Its founding concepts are ones that we can immediately recognise from the contemporary discipline of ecology: balance, wholeness, and emergent order, as well as strong emphasis on limits and sufficiency.

Wisdom, the sacred form of knowledge to which the high priests had access, is similarly suffused with imagery from the natural world: water, the tree of life, or simply the abundance of creation.

Conversely, as Margaret said on Monday, when we look at what happens when the covenant is breached, here too we find descriptions that resonate powerfully with 21<sup>st</sup> century environmental concerns – most vividly in Isaiah 24, with its description of a state in which

“The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers, the heavens languish with the earth. The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes, and broken the everlasting covenant.”

But it's not just the environmental aspects. I think it's also deeply relevant to the present that the covenant was so emphatic about justice.

Not just because of our contemporary concerns about the extent of inequality between the world's rich and poor.

But also, more specifically, because of the pressing need to agree on fair shares to global common resources like the climate, and for equity between those of us alive today and future generations as yet unborn.

The fact that the eternal covenant encompasses this juxtaposition of environmental limits and social justice is deeply apposite to where we are today – a long way ahead, in fact, of most current political philosophy.

And I think the covenant is also relevant to our present situation in its incredibly hopeful vision of human purpose on earth – one that stands in marked contrast to both the idea of Original Sin, and to Descartes' debilitating notion of an inanimate, random universe.

*All* of us have access to the sacred form of knowledge that is Wisdom, becoming angelic in the process.

*All* of us are charged with 'tilling and keeping' creation, as Genesis puts it (as opposed to having dominion over it).

And for each one of us, the primary task is less about personal salvation in the next life, than about our shared role in maintaining a just cosmic order in this one.

As the epistles of Paul and Peter both emphasise, our role on earth is as high priests – members of a royal line, of “priests for ever in the order of Melchizedek” as we find it in the epistle to the Hebrews.

And there's one more respect in which I think the eternal covenant is relevant to the present day: that it has so much to say about moments of crisis and breakdown.

As Tom Spencer observed yesterday, the book of Revelation isn't a one-off – it's part of a rich inheritance of apocalyptic literature, much of which has to do with the eternal covenant.

Of course, it goes without saying that we need to understand apocalyptic texts as myths that can help us to navigate moments of paradigmatic shift and renewal, not as texts to be taken literally. All of us will shudder at the irony of the fact that 68% of American evangelical Protestants believe increasing extreme weather events to be a sign of Biblical end times, rather than of human-caused climate change.

But if we read the eternal covenant's myths as they should be read – symbolically – then they offer remarkably clear explanations of social and ecological breakdown as the result of breaches in the creation covenant, and of atonement as the route towards restoration, in both the social and the environmental sense.

IV.

So that's why the eternal covenant speaks so powerfully to me personally.

But is it relevant more broadly, in the much larger context of a civilisation in transition?

I'm going to end with this question, and I'll try offer three tentative answers – although I'm also hoping that when we move into discussion afterwards, we can improve on them, since this remains very much a work in progress for me.

First, the theoretical answer. If, as I've argued, one of our central problems is a myth gap in the west, then I think it follows that the west's founding myths have something to say.

I've read enough Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell to believe that, even as formal religious observance declines, our Judaeo-Christian roots remain a treasure house of mythical material.

These myths were 'present at the creation' of the west, after all, and their symbols, stories and images continue to have immense power and resonance – as can be seen from the fact that even as avowed an atheist as Philip Pullman could draw so extensively and brilliantly on them for his *Dark Materials* trilogy.

I'm also mindful of a thought that the Dalai Lama has stressed over and over again: that rather than converting to Buddhism, people from the west should embrace the teachings of compassion and peace in our own traditions, and resist the urge to, as he puts it, "start all over again".

History does seem to support the lesson that effective myths are never created from scratch, or straightforwardly imported from somewhere else. Instead, at moments of paradigmatic renewal, what's happening invariably includes elements of rediscovery, reform, or reinterpretation of *what's already there*. Look at the Renaissance or the Reformation.

So that's a theoretical answer. But what about in practice? As the political strategist in me would ask: *what's the theory of influence* here? How does the eternal covenant move out of books, and into the streets?

This brings me to my second tentative answer, which is about the church.

I've so often felt frustrated, as a member of the Church of England, when I've seen the synod or other decision-making bodies *obsessing* about issues like women bishops or gay marriage – not just because, like most young people, I'm bemused as to why these questions are even controversial in the first place, but also because of the sheer waste of time and energy when there are so many more pressing questions.

And it's also striking that we've largely forgotten about the covenant in Protestantism, where our preoccupation with *sola scriptura*, and with literal historical veracity, has led to neglect of so much of our more mythical and symbolic heritage.

By bringing together care for creation, social justice, and a hopeful vision of human purpose at a time when all of these things have never been more lacking, I think the eternal covenant has the potential to contribute enormously to a process of renewal that helps the church to focus on what really matters.

And I also hope that if awareness of the centrality of the eternal covenant to the first Christians were to grow, that might help to accelerate the shift that we've started to see in parts of evangelical and charismatic Christianity, towards a much more progressive engagement with social and environmental issues.

But my third, and most tentative, answer is about what might happen *beyond* the church.

As I've already argued, I think our failure to get to grips with issues like climate, resource scarcity, and so on has put us on track for an extremely turbulent period in history, which will be hallmarked by moments of crisis and breakdown.

As we heard from both our morning speakers yesterday, this has the potential to get very scary indeed.

And I suspect we may find that as shocks of one sort or another increase – climate impacts, food price spikes, economic crises and so on – we'll find that our lack of shared myths is a source of considerable vulnerability.

For one thing, there's the risk that stories about total collapse take hold – in the process, preventing us from taking action, and thus becoming self-fulfilling prophecies. Stories are powerful things, that create our reality as much as they explain it; and we need to prevent the 'collapse' story from being the one we use to explain to ourselves what's going on, how we got there, and what happens next.

There's also the risk that our myth gap leaves the field open for those who would use moments of crisis and upheaval to pursue agendas of hate or division – a risk I became particularly aware of when I was delivering a speech on resource scarcity in Brussels, and looked up to see British National Party leader Nick Griffin listening intently in the audience.

But I think there's also a more hopeful dimension to the period of upheaval – this stretch of "rapids" on the river, as you might think of it – that we've now entered.

For crises are always opportunities too, especially for those that are ready for them. It's a point best made by the economist Milton Friedman, who wrote to his fellow monetarists in the late 1970s that,

"Only a crisis - actual or perceived - produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic



function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable.”

When we look at larger timescales, too, it does seem clear from history that periods of turbulence, crisis, and breakdown provide *extremely* fertile ground for renewal of societies’ worldviews and belief systems.

Look at China’s Warring States period, which produced Taoism and Confucianism. Look at the Jewish captivity in Babylon, which gave rise to Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah. Look at the fall of the Western Roman Empire, which paved the way for the rise of Christianity in Europe. Or look at the Black Death, from the ashes of which came the Renaissance and the Reformation.

I have a hunch that if political and institutional failures *do* lead us to a major period of crisis and breakdown, then the idea of the eternal covenant has the potential to do much to help us navigate it.

But for the eternal covenant to play this role, it has to be more than an interesting set of ideas. As Karen Armstrong reminds us, myths have to be brought to life through ritual and action if they’re to mean anything.

So the question I’ll end with is this: what does atonement look like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

We know that atonement involves sacrifice, that it’s about re-consecrating creation, that the concept of priesthood is central to it.

We also know that the eternal covenant has, over the last 3,000 years, been an idea that’s alternately surfaced and gone underground: from forming the basis of the first temple worldview to being heavily suppressed under the Deuteronomic reforms of King Josiah, and from being central to the early church to largely disappearing from view in Protestantism after the Reformation (even it remains alive and well in the Orthodox church).

So: are we poised for another moment at which it resurfaces, perhaps in a reinterpreted or renewed form?

How might this dovetail with the modern recognition that Wisdom exists in many forms and many traditions, and that this entails a need for religious pluralism?

And what might each of us be called upon to do to help support and enable this new understanding to emerge and flourish – both in our own lives, and when we join together with others?

I look forward very much to hearing your thoughts, and thank you again for the invitation to join you here today.