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A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php

ESCHATOLOGY AND ECO-ANXIETY: TOWARDS A HEALTHY AND HOPEFUL APPROACH TO ACTIVISM

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I first conceived of this paper while watching the World Cycling Championships in my home city of Glasgow and waiting for the cyclists to pass having been delayed by climate activists earlier in the route. Protest, by its nature should be disruptive, although as I sat in the sun, waiting on University Avenue outside the impressive Wellington Church of Scotland, I recalled a phrase from Luke Bretherton's *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*. Bretherton cites Charles Mathewes' article on agonism to suggest that 'Christians' attitude to political engagement should not be one of anxious grasping after control, but of relaxed playfulness.¹ When using the phrase, however, both "anxious grasping" and "relaxed playfulness" need careful consideration, especially how they might apply to Christians' response to climate change.

There are several clarifications to make at the outset. First, I am not a climate activist, therefore I am not reflecting on my experience of activism, but rather an eschatological framework that can frame activism. This paper is, therefore, by no means the last word on the issue and my hope is that activists and academics alike might engage with the ideas, pushback where needed, and refine them further, with the recognition that we are aiming at the same outcome – a world more hospitable for all. Second, there is no justification that care of creation is a Christian good – this is assumed and not argued. If you believe that actively bringing about creation's destruction to enact the new heaven and earth, then it is likely this paper will not resonate. I hope it will cause you to consider the extent to which humans can effect ultimate ends, but its purpose is not to argue for care of creation. Finally, implicit in the first and follows logically from the second, action on the care of creation is necessary and urgent. While the paper takes a critical approach to climate activism, the hope is for a sustainable approach to climate activism rather than advocating for a conservative indifference, which I admit, could be a potential interpretation.

¹ Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 82 and Charles Mathewes, "Faith, Hope, and Agony: Christian Political Participation Beyond Liberalism", *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, Vol. 21, (2001), 125-150.

By making this admission early on, I hope I can avoid it in the discussion that follows.

The discussion will initially consider Mathewes' two phrases – “anxious grasping” and “relaxed playfulness” before broadening the scope to consider Mathewes' conversation with the Augustinian tradition alongside some warnings from Niebuhr's Christian Realism. Finally, the paper will set all these discussions in the context of climate activism to aim towards a healthy and hopeful approach to climate activism.

“ANXIOUS GRASPING AFTER CONTROL”

According to Mathewes, Christians should relinquish their anxiety-induced desire to dictate the direction of history. The associated phrase, ‘anxious grasping after control’, appears in a section where Mathewes warns against ‘perfectionist energies’ and ‘utopianisms’ recognising the penultimate nature of the present.² In his footnotes, Mathewes points towards a Niebuhrian critique of liberationists, and so it is no stretch to suggest that he is thinking about Reinhold Niebuhr's comments on anxiety when he writes this advice. McCann comments that ‘by anxiety he [Niebuhr] meant something more profound in its implications, a universal mood ... a pervasive insecurity in the face of our own limits and possibilities.’³ Our awareness of finitude and lack of control over ultimate outcomes causes us to grasp after control striving to gain certainty. Gilkey further explores Niebuhr's “antidote” to this anxiety:

Repentance at the continuing reality of their own sin and trust in the divine will for themselves and for the history in which they live are the inward, human bases for “renewal” in life, a new attitude of humility toward our own works – and social structures – and a new confidence in the future necessary to mitigate the inevitable anxiety about the future.⁴

Anxiety induced by human finitude is balanced against trust in God's sovereignty over creation's ultimate ends.⁵ For Niebuhr this anxiety is a

² Mathewes, “Faith, Hope, and Agony”, 139

³ Dennis P. McCann, *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology: Practical Theologies in Creative Conflict*, (Orbis Books, 1981), 56.

⁴ Langdon Gilkey, “Reinhold Niebuhr's Theology of History,” in Nathan A. Scott, Jr., ed., *The Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr*. (The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 56.

⁵ Quoting Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man Vol.1*, McCann further describes the paradox of anxiety as understanding human limitations while also recognising limitless possibilities – human nature is ‘at once both finite

deep-rooted part of human nature that exceeds a psychological condition with the remedy being an appreciation of God's providence. It is with this underlying approach that Mathewes' reading of Augustine makes sense. Mathewes invokes Augustine's *distensio* advocating that 'we should learn to live in suspense and resistance to closure' and cultivate contentment when feeling out of control over ultimate ends.⁶

Below an Augustinian eschatological framework will be more fully discussed, but at present it is worth commenting on the clause "grasping after control." Mathewes contrasts the 'apocalyptic imagination' with the 'eschatological imagination' where the former desires to bring history to an end and the latter realises that history 'must be endured, inhabited as a mystery ... which we cannot escape of our own powers. All we can know is that a living God is in charge of history.'⁷ For Mathewes this is significant in his argument against agonism. The Christian tradition does not see the end of history in oppositional terms where good triumphs over evil in a cosmic struggle, but rather God is singular and all creation flows from Him and returns to Him alone. In an extended quote, Mathewes summarises this shift in thinking:

Most basically, then, the agonists misconstrue the nature of Christian hope, by characterizing it in immanent terms as hope for the this-worldly realization of the Kingdom of God. But true Christian hope's eschatological orientation precludes such desires for any such ending in time. Christians do not want to "win," because Christ has already won. Because of Christ's victory, Christians should not conceive of either history in general or politics in particular as essentially agonistic, essentially a struggle or a war, but as a pilgrimage.... Christians can imagine and approach moments of conflict in the eschatological conviction that "losing" and "winning" need not be objects of ultimate concern.⁸

It is this last phrase that helps Christians to release control – "winning" does not need to be of ultimate concern as Christ has already won.

Once again, this seems to draw on a Niebuhrian approach to history where God's self-communication in Christ is the disclosure of history rather than just a promise of what is to come.⁹ Niebuhr is particu-

and free.' McCann, *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology*, 56. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Volume 1*, (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), 183.

⁶ Mathewes, "Faith, Hope, and Agony", 139.

⁷ Mathewes, "Faith, Hope, and Agony", 138-139.

⁸ Mathewes, "Faith, Hope, and Agony", 138.

⁹ See Gilkey, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Theology of History", 43.

larly aware of the persistence of sin in human history and thus warns against believing we can create a utopia. McCann observes that Niebuhr had reservations about collective utopian action: ‘no human association, Christian or otherwise, can claim to have established a perfect society – a kingdom of God – on earth. All such assertions are rejected as either “ideological” pretensions or “utopian” projections. In either case, they are emphatically not the meaning of Christian eschatology.’¹⁰ Likewise Gilkey comments: ‘no historical order will perfectly incarnate such a society of love. And the more it claims to do so, or to represent the road to it, the more ... [it] will feel justified in their domination of the other vitalities in the community.’¹¹ Gilkey continues that humans can at best ‘relieve, mitigate, or decrease’ problems caused by human destruction but ‘cannot eradicate it once and for all.’¹² Not only is the pursuit of a utopia a false ideal, even the road to it does not give God’s sovereignty its due place.

There is, therefore, a warning for both ends of the spectrum. Whether it is humans that want to bring history to its climax by destructive action towards creation or those who think incremental progress will bring about full redemption of creation, Mathewes sees this as a vain grasping after control. While the utopian ideal is often a well-meaning but fruitless project, history is littered with utopian dreams that result in dystopian nightmares as they try to eradicate perceived flaws and impurities. Therefore, whether it is control in the form of well-meaning preservation of creation, or self-centred escape from creation, both perpetuate human domination.¹³

“RELAXED PLAYFULNESS”

If Mathewes’ first concern from the perspective of agonism is that Christian eschatology removes them from the day-to-day concerns of political engagement, then his second is an ‘indifference concerning politics’ aris-

¹⁰ McCann, *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology*, 73.

¹¹ See Gilkey, “Reinhold Niebuhr’s Theology of History,” 49.

¹² See Gilkey, “Reinhold Niebuhr’s Theology of History”, 52.

¹³ Despite their criticisms of Niebuhr’s eschatology in favour of a more progressivist transformation, there is an interesting overlap with Hauerwas and Willimon’s *Resident Aliens*. Hauerwas and Willimon advocate that Christian non-violence derives from the knowledge that in the future God’s Kingdom will be non-violent rather than Christian peace-making being motivated from an ‘anxious self-interested protection of our world as it is.’ Both Mathewes and Hauerwas / Willimon see anxiety as the misplaced motivation for taking control. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Abingdon Press, 1989), 89.

ing from a reputation that ‘Christians would rather be nice than win.’¹⁴ He is aware, therefore, that using the language of “relaxed playfulness” will do nothing to appease this concern.¹⁵ However, Mathewes points to two sources for insight into the playful element of the phrase – Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* and Rahner’s *Man at Play*.¹⁶ Rahner’s approach bridges the gap between an anxious grasping after control and Mathewes’ concept of relaxed playfulness. Rahner argues that playfulness stops a person from ‘distorting’ the world by avoiding approaching creation as controlled by humans. Instead, playfulness ‘sees the limits and inadequacy of all created things.’¹⁷ Rahner’s approach holds in tension that creation should be held lightly knowing it belongs to God, while at the same time Christians must press creation to their heart because God the Creator can be seen in it.¹⁸ Rahner draws on the concept of *eutrapelia*, notably used by Aristotle, which suggests a ‘gracious’ playfulness involving ‘a certain camaraderie centered on the pursuit of shared delights.’¹⁹ In turn, fostering *eutrapelia* can help political and civil advancement because individuals become ‘aware of the importance of pleasant relations for the wellbeing of the political community.’²⁰ It is, however, Huizinga who best highlights what Mathewes has in mind with the phrase “playfulness”. Huizinga does not see playfulness as opposite to seriousness, in fact play can be very serious when it is a contest of skill or a high-stakes sporting event. Moreover, in play we view ourselves as play-ers (or, for examples, actors within a play) who participate within the action rather than simply as observers.²¹ For Huizinga, playfulness does not diminish the importance of the event and invites us into it rather than standing-by on the sidelines. While “relaxed playfulness” may be critiqued on its appropriateness in relation to critical matters of human life and dignity, and though Mathewes moves the argument on quickly, his use of the phrase contrasts well with “anxious grasping” without meaning to indicate indifference.

In summary, Mathewes advice to relinquish the anxious grasping after control and replacing it with an attitude of relaxed playfulness is to

¹⁴ Mathewes, “Faith, Hope, and Agony”, 136.

¹⁵ Mathewes, “Faith, Hope, and Agony”, 140.

¹⁶ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955) and Hugo Rahner, *Man at Play or, Did You Ever Practise Eutrapelia?* (Burns and Oates, 1965).

¹⁷ Rahner, *Man at Play*, 100.

¹⁸ Rahner, *Man at Play*, 9.

¹⁹ Carli, Silvia, “Play a Little! Aristotle on Eutrapelia.” *The Review of Metaphysics* 74, no. 4 (2021): 495.

²⁰ Silvia, “Play a Little!”, 495.

²¹ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 15.

acknowledge humanity's finite existence and limited control over ultimate outcomes when viewed against God's sovereignty and the hope and confidence that brings. It is not a careless indifference to creation, but a call to participate in activities that reflect God's participation within creation.

MATHEWES' AUGUSTINIAN ESCHATOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Lying beneath Mathewes' advice is an Augustinian eschatological framework. Not only is this clear from Mathewes own work but in Bretherton's use of Mathewes, it is placed within a discussion of an Augustinian approach to political engagement. Bretherton distinguishes his approach from Niebuhr's (particularly on the role of the church in political life), but acknowledges there are resonances between both, especially related to an eschatological framework.²² Thus like Gilkey above, Bretherton writes:

Augustine and Alinsky are anti-progressive, anti-utopian, and anti-ideological. History does not bear within itself its own resolution and so while the order of things can be improved in incremental ways, there is no inherent direction to history: things will not always get better (or worse). The non-progressive nature of history means that a perfect or true order of things is not realizable within history, so any human system or ideology that claims to provide the means of bringing about this order is a denial of the fallen and contingent nature of historical existence.²³

Bretherton describes the underlying Augustinian eschatological framework helpfully, noting that the present situation in the *saeculum* is 'open, ambivalent, and undetermined.'²⁴ Furthermore, he highlights the balance of Augustine's eschatology as resisting triumphalism ('marked by an expectation of progress until the church would overcome the world') and separatism (caused by the belief that 'history is oriented toward regress or a movement away from God').²⁵ The present situation 'neither promises nor sets at risk the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is established, if not fully manifest, and the "end" of history is already achieved and fulfilled in Christ.'²⁶ It is with this Augustinian eschatological framework in mind that Bretherton sees a link to Mathewes' advice.

²² See especially Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, 88-91.

²³ Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, 85.

²⁴ Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, 81-82.

²⁵ Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, 82.

²⁶ Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, 82.

Bretherton takes much of his reading of Augustine from Markus' work *Christianity and the Secular*, which adds a helpful layer of understanding.²⁷ Markus describes Augustine's *saeculum* as secular (which is less of a tautology than it might appear). The *saeculum* is a middle-ground which is neither sacred nor profane and so resists any notion that the present situation is getting worse (more profane) or better (more sacred) or even that it can be taken over fully by either the sacred or the profane. In short, the *saeculum* is a neutral space with a mix of sacred and profane.²⁸ This leads Markus to conclude that 'in the most general terms, for Augustine political discourse is concerned, not with the ultimate realities of human fulfilment and salvation, but with what, in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's language, we might call the "penultimate".'²⁹ This is not to suggest that penultimate realities are not important or do not cause real suffering / joy, but rather they do not have an impact on the ultimate direction of human history. We can still bring relief to suffering or joy to despair within the *saeculum*, without those actions speeding up or slowing down the ultimate realities of Christian eschatology.³⁰ This is best summed up when Markus writes: 'For Augustine, no social arrangements, no human justice or ingenuity, could establish the Kingdom of God or bring us any closer to it; only God's saving acts could do that.'³¹

A key strand in this eschatological framework is the persistence of sin within the *saeculum*, the clarity of which arose by Augustine balancing two opposing streams of thought. On the one hand, once Augustine had turned his back on Manicheism, he set about to oppose their ideas; however, in part due to his robust rejection of Manicheism, the later Augustine defended himself against Pelagianism. Mathewes alludes to Augustine's middle way as a 'different ontology and cosmology' which rejects 'the received view of the cosmos as formed in an agonistic struggle between two (or more) divine entities, replacing it with a cosmology of a single monarchic Deity from whom creation has tragically and inexplicably swerved.'³² Forsyth develops this perspective commenting,

²⁷ Bretherton mentions Markus in text a number of times and several references to his work in the endnotes for his chapter. R. A. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

²⁸ Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, 37.

²⁹ Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, 40.

³⁰ This sentiment resonates with Mathewes' ideas of 'apocalyptic longings' and 'utopian fantasies' as 'equally impatient desires to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth on our own terms.' Mathewes, "Faith, Hope, and Agony", 149 footnote 40.

³¹ Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, 55.

³² Mathewes, "Faith, Hope, and Agony", 145.

there is no real battle between opposing forces since the substance of the one apparent force, evil, is illusory.... Though evil as substance may be illusory, its effects are very real, leading even to eternal damnation. What is more, argued Augustine, we are born with a sinful nature, in bondage to sin, and only grace can liberate us. Our own efforts are worth nothing, since they originate in sin.³³

As with the language of ultimate and penultimate above, this is not to suggest that suffering is somehow to our benefit or does not exist, but rather it is not the overflow of a cosmic battle between good and evil beings.³⁴ By rejecting the Manichean dualism, Augustine defended himself against a charge of hypocrisy from the Pelagians by emphasizing the persistence of sin within creation alongside a doctrine of grace as a necessity for salvation. Forsyth concludes that Augustine 'was always in danger either of Pelagian optimism or Manichaeism' however 'both heresies denied the distance of man from God and thus failed to read correctly the situation of man within the cosmic structure.'³⁵ Thus, Augustine's eschatological framework rejects the agonistic struggle of the Manicheans so conceiving of the *saeculum* as a neutral space, which alongside the "end" of history fulfilled in Christ, means the *saeculum* is neither progressing towards a better future nor away from it.

However, addressing the Pelagian concern, the *saeculum* is still marked by sin and, therefore, has competing demands, some sacred, some profane, but all penultimate. We are neither helping creation's progress towards a utopia nor are we aiding its regression towards destruction. There are, of course, those who are orientated towards God and those who are orientated away from God, meaning humans sometimes contribute to the relief of suffering and sometimes the cause of it – all are marked by sin's corruption and all can be receptacles of grace. While no society can be wholly good in the degree of the eschatological City of God, this

³³ Neil Forsyth, *The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth*, (Princeton University Press, 1987), 405.

³⁴ Bentley Hart summarises this point concisely and eloquently in his excellent short book *Doors of the Sea*: 'Evil is born in the will: it consists not in some other separate thing standing alongside the things of creation, but it is only a shadow of turning of the hearts and minds of rational creatures away from the light of God back toward the nothingness from which all things are called. This is not to say that evil is somehow illusory; it is only to say that evil, rather than being a discrete substance, is instead a kind of ontological wasting disease.' David Bentley Hart, *Doors of the Sea: Where was God in the Tsunami?*, (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 73.

³⁵ Forsyth, *The Old Enemy*, 407-408.

does not preclude some societies being better than others. This is a matter of degree dependent on the objects of love that society holds in common (i.e. what is held to be most desirable for the society) – the more humane the objects are, the better the society will be and vice versa. Markus notes that though ‘Augustine removes civil society from the sphere where perfect justice can be realised, he does not remove it from the realm where moral norms are applicable. They are yardsticks by which its quality is to be assessed, not part of its meaning.’³⁶ Thus it is important for Christians to be involved in civil society so that they can contribute and advocate for common objects of love. Markus continues,

Augustine, as we have seen, defined the ideally perfect society in eschatological terms. Being totally transcendent, it was thus removed from the range of anything that could be aspired to as a goal to be aimed at. Actual societies are too disrupted by sin and always at the mercy of the play of power.... But though they cannot aspire to the peace and justice of the eschatological City, they can aim higher than the level of the den of robbers.³⁷

Societies can be more humane and more caring when the objects of love for that society seek the common good for all humanity. This is the basis on which Bretherton can write that ‘forming common objects of love between the citizens of the two cities is a necessary condition of faithful witness to the Lordship of Christ over all things.’³⁸

NIEBUHRIAN WARNINGS

While not conflating Niebuhr’s approach with the Augustinian eschatological framework, there are some clear parallels, indicated explicitly in Bretherton and implicitly in Mathewes.³⁹ Due to these parallels some criticisms levelled at Niebuhr should be considered especially as they criticise

³⁶ Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, 64.

³⁷ Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, 64. Markus makes an interesting claim that ‘a virtually wholly Christian society would be likely, in Augustine’s eyes, to encourage a dangerous delusion about its distance from the eschatological City.’ It is important to recognise the persistence of sin and thus the distance from the City of God, even in the most Christian of societies.

³⁸ Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, 84.

³⁹ As mentioned above Bretherton addresses the similarities and differences with Niebuhr in Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, 88-91. Mathewes, on the other hand, cites Niebuhr in his footnotes on several occasions as a good example of the eschatological imagination and of providing a good critique on liberation theology. See Mathewes, “Faith, Hope, and Agony”, 149 footnote 38; 40.

inaction or indifference. At the outset, I tried to ensure that inaction or indifference was not intended, and I have tried to lay the foundations for significant action as a penultimate goal, despite the Augustinian / Niebuhrian approach recognising human action has no effect on ultimate ends. However, two significant criticisms must be addressed. The first comes from Bretherton's critique that Niebuhr only ever foresaw political orientation as feasible on a personal level. This critique is particularly limiting when it comes to large-scale issues that have both individual and structural components. Bretherton writes that 'such an approach gives up any hope of the Spirit acting to irrupt anticipations and glimpses of the eschaton within the saeculum and renounces its vocation to bear witness to the world as it is in Christ within the world turned in on itself.'⁴⁰ Bretherton argues that through community organizing, churches can listen to both the needs of the community and God's *verbum externum* in order to participate in the common good as a vision of political life.⁴¹ Nothing in this discussion should suggest political indifference beyond the personal and pursuing conversations about shared objects of love within society is a good place to start.

The second criticism comes from James Cone who sees Christian Realism as conservative and specifically leads to inaction. Cone contrasts Niebuhr's Christian Realism with 'what he [Niebuhr] regarded as naïve or idealistic optimism.'⁴² The naïve optimism represents the Renaissance's confidence in human progress, which Niebuhr balanced against the Reformation's pessimism about the persistence of sin's corruption.⁴³ However, Christian Realism's (arguably correct) lack of confidence in human progress, Cone argues, stifles commitment to radical change. Cone illustrates the stifling effect of Niebuhr's approach by citing his 'gradualism' particularly in relation to racial injustice.⁴⁴ Moreover, the lack of desire for radical change preserved the unjust status quo: 'Had [Niebuhr] turned on the radio or television, he could have heard the eloquent and powerful voice of Malcolm talking about the limits of the bourgeois civil rights movement and its leaders. Malcolm was not interested in proximate justice defined by liberal whites.'⁴⁵ Ultimately, it leads Cone to state

⁴⁰ Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, 90.

⁴¹ Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, 91-106.

⁴² James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (Orbis Books, 2011), 33.

⁴³ See McCann, *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology*, 74.

⁴⁴ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 39. Bretherton also alludes to Niebuhr's lack of commitment to radical racial equality through political institutions which he says Niebuhr thought was 'sentimental idealism'. Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, 89.

⁴⁵ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 48-49.

that ‘Christian realism was not only a source of Niebuhr’s radicalism but also of his conservatism.’⁴⁶ The criticism of Niebuhr’s position on racial equality is important and must be addressed by those who adopt his approach. Similarly, there is the potential lurking beneath the Augustinian eschatological framework to foster indifference towards radical social change. However, it need not be so if one heeds Markus’ advice that moral norms in society continue to be important. Christians must maintain the responsibility to influence the common objects of love within societies and, repeating Gilkey, ‘relieve, mitigate, or decrease’ suffering caused by patterns of human destruction.⁴⁷

CLIMATE ACTIVISM

How might an Augustinian eschatological framework impact Christian climate activism? As noted at the beginning, I am neither attempting to suggest practices nor criticise any practice. This is not my aim, nor would it be faithful to my experience (or lack of it). What I hope to articulate is an orientation towards climate activism that is healthier and more hopeful. Furthermore, I hope to show that climate activism is not driven by an appearance of relevance but comes from a faithful witness to the Lordship of Christ, which in turn can be a way to find common objects of love with those around us.⁴⁸

In recent years burnout has been linked to climate activism and it is not difficult to understand the reason why. One definition suggests that ‘burnout is a result of stress accumulated over long-term involvement in situations that are emotionally demanding.’⁴⁹ Others speak of the urgency of climate activism and name the anxiety caused by apparent lack of progress as eco-anxiety.⁵⁰ Eco-anxiety is not simply worry but a preoc-

⁴⁶ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 48.

⁴⁷ Gilkey, “Reinhold Niebuhr’s Theology of History,” 52.

⁴⁸ Within this framework, climate activism between Christians and non-Christians may be a shared pursuit. I’m not suggesting that only Christians who witness to the Lordship of Christ can be activists, however, I am suggesting that because their motivations are different, the resulting attitude and psychological impact will be different.

⁴⁹ S. Burke and B. Wauchope, “Dealing with Burnout” *Australian Psychological Society (APS)*, available: <https://psychology.org.au/getmedia/994934a8-2916-4599-8806-aa3e0d2fd3c3/dealing-with-burnout-climate-change.pdf> [Last Accessed 09/10/2023].

⁵⁰ For example there is both personal reflections and research in the field of psychology that support the claim: S. Burke and B. Wauchope, “Dealing with Burnout” *Australian Psychological Society (APS)*, available: <https://psychol>

cupation that is ‘overwhelming and debilitating.’⁵¹ While some research suggests activism can reduce eco-anxiety as an outlet for feelings of helplessness, the relationship between activism and anxiety remains complex. Fisk’s excellent “Reflections on a Healthy Prophetic Climate Movement” observes ‘our horror and fear at the current and future climate crisis is certainly what had led us on to action. On whether this was a *good* motivation for healthy forms of action is a question on which I am now more ambivalent.’⁵² There is no denying the potential for anxiety initiated by the climate crisis and, while some activism may be beneficial, the motivation behind activism remains a complex area.

Can the Augustinian eschatological framework lead to a healthy foundation for climate activism? In response to the urgency of climate change, can “anxious grasping after control” be avoided and, instead, embrace “relaxed playfulness”? While relaxed playfulness does not reduce the gravity of the situation it can help Christians to foster a healthy attitude towards climate activism. Recalling Augustine’s *distensio*, Christians can cultivate an attitude of contentment recognising when ultimate ends are outside of our control. Combined with Mathewes’ eschatological imagination, Christians can learn to accept that history, including our present time, is to be endured, knowing that ‘a living God is in charge of history.’⁵³ As alluded to above, the modern fascination with creating utopia often results in destructive dystopia. Fisk notes that where modernism met Christianity it resulted in a ‘Christian obsession with the end of days [that] fed into colonialism and industrial capitalism, which has led to the

ogy.org.au/getmedia/994934a8-2916-4599-8806-aa3e0d2fd3c3/dealing-with-burnout-climate-change.pdf [Last Accessed 09/10/2023]; S. Morris, “Burned Out on a Burning Planet: Reflections from a disillusioned climate activist”, *Common Home: Georgetown University*, available: <https://commonhome.georgetown.edu/topics/climateenergy/burned-out-on-a-burning-planet/> [Last Accessed 09/10/2023]; Schwartz, S.E.O., Benoit, L., Clayton, S. et al. “Climate change anxiety and mental health: Environmental activism as buffer.” *Current Psychology* 42 (2023), 16708–16721; Latkin C, Dayton L, Scherkoske M, Countess K, Thrul J. “What predicts climate change activism?: An examination of how depressive symptoms, climate change distress, and social norms are associated with climate change activism.” *Journal of Climate Change Health* Vol.8. (Oct 2022), np.

⁵¹ Yale Sustainability, “Yale Experts Explain Climate Anxiety”, *Yale Sustainability*, available: <https://sustainability.yale.edu/explainers/yale-experts-explain-climate-anxiety> [Last Accessed 09/10/2023].

⁵² Anna Fisk, “Reflections on a Healthy Prophetic Climate Movement (1)”, available: <https://annafisk.com/2021/06/26/reflections-on-a-healthy-prophetic-climate-movement-1/> [Last Accessed 09/20/2023]

⁵³ Mathewes, “Faith, Hope, and Agony”, 138-139.

situation we are not in.’ She continues that the urgency created by time-based climate campaigning as a cipher for progress is unhelpful, suggesting that ‘such a continuation of modernity’s grand narrative of history as progress dissolves in the face of the realities of the Anthropocene.’⁵⁴ Climate activism encourages an urgency to respond before time runs out.⁵⁵ While this motivation is logical and to some degree truthful, a Christian can relinquish anxiety by accepting that God is sovereign, rather than grasping to control the preservation of creation. This is not fatalism but relinquishing the responsibility for ultimate concerns.

Instead, Christian activism can be playful. They are not comical or without consequence, but, recalling Huizinga, they are playful because humans are not observers but participants, actors within creation. Furthermore, Christians do not sit by idly, but as Rahner suggests, playful actions recognise the tension between holding creation lightly because it ultimately belongs to God; and not allowing it to be destroyed because God is reflected in creation. In essence, Christians can cultivate an attitude releasing them from the deep-rooted anxiety that stems from their own finitude, while still embracing the call to action as participants within a creaturely order marked by a Creator God.

If eco-anxiety is one obstacle to sustainable climate activism, the other is the closely related idea of “doomism”. Doomism is where a person is overwhelmed with a problem to the degree that they are paralysed to respond. In the context of the climate crisis ‘presented with the idea that the planet that gives us life might be dying, parts of our brain shut down. We are unable to think logically.’⁵⁶ While some churches may be indifferent due to apathy, others may be battling doomism. In an interview, Michael Mann, a climate scientist, comments, ‘I think there are a lot of

⁵⁴ Anna Fisk, “Reflections on a Healthy Prophetic Climate Movement (2)”, available: <https://annafisk.com/2021/06/26/reflections-on-a-healthy-prophetic-climate-movement-1/> [Last Accessed 09/20/2023]

⁵⁵ Fisk helpfully observes that such an approach to the climate crisis shows that ‘the climate crisis is a racist crisis’ on the grounds that it has been a matter of urgency for non-Western countries for a lot longer but only now, as it begins to affect the West, has the urgency been felt more keenly. “Reflections on a Healthy Prophetic Climate Movement (2)”, available: <https://annafisk.com/2021/06/26/reflections-on-a-healthy-prophetic-climate-movement-1/> [Last Accessed 09/20/2023]

⁵⁶ Eric Holthaus, “Stop scaring people about climate change. It doesn’t work.” Grist, available: <https://grist.org/climate-energy/stop-scaring-people-about-climate-change-it-doesnt-work/> [Last Accessed 09/10/2023]. This post links to academic journals to support the claim but is helpful in summarising the overall argument.

really good, well-meaning, well-intentioned, good-hearted people who fall into doom and despair. And they are not the enemy!⁵⁷ Mann observes that framing the climate crisis as hopeless (wrongly in his opinion) demotivates people from acting with the antidote being to re-energise climate activism with hope.

Mathewes' Augustinian eschatological framework is, at its heart, hopeful. As noted above by both Gilkey and Bretherton, in light of Christ's resurrection, the direction of history in an ultimate sense is not getting better or worse. This is not to diminish the real suffering caused by the climate crisis, which is only increasing, nor is it to suppress climate activism, but it does frame activity in a different way. Christians have a dual responsibility in responding to the climate crisis. The first, as already indicated, is to be present to advocate for the care of creation as a shared object of love within the *saeculum*. In other words, Christians should be at the forefront of campaigning for creation care, not because it will save the world, but because it is how Christians can foster what is best for creation and all its creatures within the present age. It is, as already noted, an act of 'faithful witness to the Lordship of Christ over all things.'⁵⁸ Responding to the climate crisis is not a matter of jumping on the bandwagon of relevancy, but rather an act of faithfulness that should transcend the current crisis. Even if creation was flourishing, therefore able to disregard the current crisis, Christians should be advocating for creation care as a common object of love for all society. The second responsibility is to relieve suffering and act to prevent further suffering caused by the climate crisis. While the *saeculum* will never be the perfect eschatological Kingdom of God, and to imagine it as nearing such is damaging, it can aim to be more than "a den of robbers." By God's grace, Christians orientated towards the City of God, can act in ways that acknowledge the world is not as it should be. Therefore, there is no place for immoral indifference in the climate crisis within this Augustinian eschatological framework.

Actions are more hopeful because they are not motivated by an ultimate end goal. Christians who recognise that their actions do not bring the Kingdom nearer (nor our missteps distance the Kingdom), are more hopeful because they act in faith rather than to achieve a certain outcome. While modernism's progress tried to find hope by imagining a world moving forward, the Augustinian eschatological framework finds

⁵⁷ Michaela Barret, "'Urgency and Agency': Michael Mann on Conquering Climate Despair." *Behavioral Scientist*, available: <https://behavioralscientist.org/urgency-and-agency-michael-mann-on-conquering-climate-despair/> [Last Accessed 09/10/2023]

⁵⁸ Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, 84.

hope from ‘the “end” of history [being] already achieved and fulfilled in Christ.’⁵⁹ In short, when acting out of faithfulness, hope arises from the in-breaking of the Spirit in the present, rather than from any perceived outcome to be achieved. Regardless of whether the world is getting better or worse, it does not matter when our actions arise out of a concern for the present. The antidote to doomism is hope-filled, grace-inspired action.

In summary, the Augustinian eschatological framework is not simply a fatalistic, indifferent, “leave it to God” attitude. Christians have a very real responsibility to advocate for the care of creation as a common object of love and a responsibility to care for creation because God cares for creation. Furthermore, Christians have a responsibility to care for creation to relieve the suffering of those affected by climate change and catastrophic climate events. However, if Christians believe they can save the world this brings with it overwhelming and unrealistic expectations and, if hope comes from success, this can easily lead to despondency when successes are few and far between. However, if Christians recognise their actions are important, vital even, but of penultimate value, they are released from the unrealistic expectations and associated anxiety and instead infused with a hopefulness despite evidence to the contrary, because they hope in God’s sovereignty and his ultimate ends.

REMAINING QUESTIONS

There are (at least) two remaining questions and one practical consideration that strike at the foundations of the framework. I started by acknowledging that the aim is to promote onward discussion, not to be a final word and so these questions are raised with that aim in mind. While I am persuaded by the Augustinian eschatological framework as a means of promoting a healthier and more hopeful approach to climate activism, I recognise that there are other theological approaches to eschatology. Noting Cone’s response to Christian Realism, I wonder whether the Augustinian eschatological framework is too conservative a model for a crisis of this scale. At the risk of contradicting myself, a more progressive eschatological framework, one which acknowledges that sin may be resisted rather than persist, may lead to more radical transformational action. Can there be a radical transformational approach that also fosters healthy and hopeful activism in the terms described above? I hope the Augustinian eschatological framework could facilitate radical transformation, but I acknowledge that some may still perceive it as inadequate.

⁵⁹ Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, 82.

The second question is whether the climate crisis is an ultimate or penultimate concern? It is penultimate in the sense that humans created the crisis and therefore, in theory, could be the ones to overcome the crisis. However, I suspect the failed project of modernity's progression towards perfection, must lead us to the conclusion that at the heart of the climate crisis is the persistence of sin on a systemic level, perhaps even an ontological level, which lends itself more to categorising the climate crisis as a problem of ultimate concerns. While on the one hand humans must do all we can to relieve the suffering caused by the climate crisis, on the other I am hesitant to suggest that even with our best-efforts humans could solve the climate crisis in a way that frees creation from bondage.

Although the scope of the discussion did not include the "how to" there is one significant practical hurdle that is relevant. While it is straightforward to mentally assent (or not) to the above ideas, simply telling someone that they should not be anxious when faced with an overwhelming problem is generally ineffective. Like any good piece of theological reflection, this is not the end of the conversation, but merely a provocation to reflect further. As indicated at the beginning, the next step must be in conversation with activists and churches alike to move the theory into practice and once more reflect upon the experience. In the meantime, may we have the grace to act for a better world for all.