

Faith in a time of collapse

(Jenkins C and Wright S 2022)

*"We humans have already gone too far, and momentum is too great, to avoid breakdown and collapse. We are already in profound overshoot – stealing from future generations and disrupting wellbeing for all life. We can continue this way for only a short while longer. If we continue robbing from the future, the collapse of human systems and eco-systems is our inescapable destiny. However, if we collectively witness the world of devastation that is growing exponentially, we can choose together a more favourable future for all life. The alternative is devastating ruin and the functional extinction of humans on Earth."*¹

This note is intended to inform Christian leaders, and Christians more widely, about possible responses to the potential for ecological and societal collapse - and to support them in contextualising these challenges in the light of their faith. It draws on materials of the [Deep Adaptation Forum](#) ("DAF"), and in particular the DAF Interfaith Circle.

Members of the DAF Interfaith Circle, including a number of Christian faith leaders, recognise a need to share with congregations the possibility that humanity has left it too late to 'solve' the problem of climate change timeously. We accept that the delicate balance of the world's ecosystem has been changed adversely by human activity in recent centuries. Planetary processes are now under way, which, despite optimistic voices that we might change things or invent rescuing devices, are unstoppable. This does not mean that we should give up and abandon the prevention of environmental pollution and the consumption of fossil fuels. There are good reasons for continuing to care for the world around us, but the future looks fierce for all of life, including ourselves. We may wonder whether we do our congregations a disservice if we don't talk about the possibility of serious consequences, and about how people might respond - emotionally and spiritually, as well as practically.

What is 'Deep Adaptation' and the community which has grown up in response to it?

The term 'Deep Adaptation' refers to a [paper](#) written by [Professor Jem Bendell](#) in 2018 (updated in 2020). In it, he assesses the peer-reviewed climate science of the time. He concludes that ecological, and consequently societal, collapse is likely as a result of climate change. From DAF's website:

'[w]hen using the term social or societal collapse, we are referring to the uneven ending to our current means of sustenance, shelter, security, pleasure, identity and meaning. Others may prefer the term societal breakdown when referring to the same process. People who consider that societal collapse or breakdown is either inevitable, likely or already unfolding, are using the term "deep adaptation" to explore responses².

In addition to Bendell's seminal work, a considerable body of evidence-based literature and other sources of information (see appendix) is now available discussing "collapsology" and how best to respond to it.

This may be the most frightening news to hear.

The possibility of environmental and social collapse is a fearful prospect. It touches into the deepest fears of being human - of loss, grief and death. What we have done to our world, the creation, is to fail life, to fail the Divine. Sorrow, guilt, shame and anger pile into this emotional tornado we have created affecting all generations. Embracing Deep Adaptation and its consequences plunges us into a crisis of meaning – of who we are and why we are here, our connection to life and its purpose, our relationship to the Source of All, whoever or whatever that is to us. This is the very stuff of spirituality and a spiritual crisis needs spiritual solutions as well as social, economic, emotional and ecological ones. Faith traditions, with all their strengths and weaknesses, have rich histories of understanding and practice in the art of spiritual support. There is a part to be played. The need for an army of therapists, counsellors and spiritual guides of all sorts in the future is going to be enormous. We have lots of ways of avoiding

¹ Elgin D 2022 Choosing earth. Elgin. Choosingearth.org. P3

² <https://deepadaptation.ning.com/> accessed June 2022

bad news, not all of them healthy ones. We are going to need a lot of help if we are to face the future and choose healthier options rather than others such as denial, depression or a lurch into simplistic solutions.³

What is the approach that DAF encourages and cultivates?

DAF proposes responses to this predicament that are compassionate, respectful and curious. Whilst it's a secular organisation, its nearly 15,000 members include many Christians of various denominations, as well as those of other faiths and none. Many of the responses it encourages are consistent with Christian values - even Christ-like. Compassion and loving responses are central, and all other responses flow from this - curiosity, respect, mutual care, and the building of relationship and community. [DAF's Charter](#), to which its community members agree to adhere, captures all of these, and is supplemented by a [commitment to non-violence](#). DAF community members are not the same as 'preppers', who many see (rightly or wrongly) as people fixated on preparing for disaster with an eye only to their, and their family's, survival and wellbeing.

Is Deep Adaptation's vision of collapse the same as 'End Times'?

The effects upon our planet and its consequences for all of life are seen by some as signs of predicted 'end times'. This is not the view of DAF. The fierce challenges now facing us have arisen because of human choices down the centuries and our loss of respect for the web of life. Christians involved in DAF tend not to subscribe to views of a Divine who is punishing or wantonly cruel, rather One who is compassionately engaged with and in the world - and that includes efforts to bring about the best in our responses to what lies ahead. We are given some clues as to what the run-up to 'end times' might look like. It can be tempting to think those signs are all around us. DAF is not inclined to such conclusions and directs its energy to seeking practical solutions, community engagement and individual and collective support of all kinds – rooted in the love of life, each other and the Absolute.

Drawing on scripture, we are not asked by the Divine to be sure, rather to simply follow given commandments - and chiefly, the greatest of them all, that we [love the Beloved completely and one another](#) - everyone, no matter our differences - as we love ourselves. And there is comfort in this; rather than tying ourselves in knots, contemplating what we should be doing to prepare for the second coming, we can trust in the Divine and keep doing the next right thing, and the next one, and the next... and maybe that's as good a preparation as any for which we can wish.

Won't God save us from collapse?

Perhaps: again, it may not be for us to know - though the age of prophecy isn't necessarily dead, and there may be those who *do* hear God's guidance on the subject. What is for sure is that we are given free will - and with it, come consequences. Christ's suffering for us doesn't automatically bring us freedom from the results of our actions. What we're seeing in the world, which sometimes feels like trouble everywhere we look, can often be traced back to our misuse of that free will (and as the Bible illustrates in various books, it's often others who suffer the worst consequences of our misbehaviour; so it is that those in the majority world - the Global South - already suffer the consequences of climate change, largely brought on by the lifestyles of many of us in the Global North).

The Bible also tells us that as well as having faith, we need to take right action; we can't just sit back and wait, no matter how fervently we pray whilst doing so, for God to sort out our mess (though of course we would not rule this out! Amazing and improbable things do emerge out of divine Will). Perhaps the words attributed to St. Augustine are apposite here, "Pray as if everything depended on God, work as if everything depended on you."

Is Deep Adaptation's approach 'doomerism'?

Absolutely not. In fact some members of the community have said that as we learn to 'be' with the difficult idea of collapse, and to accept the likely transience of our current way of life, we learn a more immediate appreciation of Divine abundant grace. It's possible that through these challenging times, some will re-learn ways of caring for one another and the world that make us into the best people we are meant to be – in the image of God.

And moreover, we know we're called to do what we can in service of others. Every step we take to mitigate or help others adapt to climate change, lessens the harms that others (and we) will suffer - so

³ Wright S 2022 Fugue for the infidel falcons (in press)

it's more than worthwhile. Our stewarding of the creation has never been more needed, both for the sake of our fellow co-habitants on Earth, and for the love of that creation itself. Let's run the race we've been given, in whatever ways we're able. "[B]ut those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint"⁴.

Lastly, it's worth noting that a courageous acceptance of the possibility of collapse is not 'negative' - it's realism. Without an acknowledgement of our problems, we cannot hope to address them. If we go to our GP with an ailment, and he or she decides not to tell us about it because it might be 'too distressing', we are done a disservice. It is the same with the planetary ailments which a part of humanity has brought upon us all. There is an opportunity for the church here to provide leadership, spiritual leadership in a time of spiritual collapse. We can act because we know:

*"Old certainties crumble, what is lacking ... is any coherent, credible, halfway optimistic story about the future, voiced by someone people feel they may be able to trust."*⁵

Is the church in the deepening crisis the someone, and something, to be trusted?

What might this mean for Christians?

For those with whom these issues resonate, there are a number of possibilities:

1. Consider how to introduce the frightening, but real, possibility of collapse with others. It may be important to ensure that those others are in reasonably robust mental health, and also that they have support when processing these ideas.
2. Include an element of lament in spiritual practices - we have not cared for the creation as we ought, and there has been and will be more loss and damage.
3. Look at what *can* be done to improve our lifestyles, taking into account both local impacts, and the impact our lifestyles have on the rest of the world. Take action where possible.
4. Appreciate and give thanks for the beauty and abundance that remains: its transience may lend it an especial sweetness.
5. Walk with one another compassionately, lovingly and respectfully into and through whatever difficulties may be coming. Care for one another, and ourselves.
6. Pray. In difficult times it can be tempting to prioritise action, but prayer is not 'doing nothing'; bringing our sadness, fears and admissions of failure to our experience of the Absolute can help us navigate really difficult emotions, as well as helping us find the words - or perhaps just the feelings - to seek the comfort and encouragement that comes from a sense of connection to All-that-is.
7. Live in hope in the face of despair, remembering that down the ages spiritual teachings have been filled with stories of profound loss, yet out of death, life, redemption and transformation can be born; and that life has gone on for aeons and is more than what we know in temporal reality
8. Provide pastoral care, counselling, therapeutic support and spiritual direction to those embracing the fierce realities of deep adaptation, so that healthy rather than destructive responses may emerge.
9. Support with compassionate expertise and personal, spiritual and material resources to help individuals and communities adapt and nurture each other through potential fierce changes and disruption - to weather patterns, supply systems, resources, local and national support structures, and social cohesion;
10. In the face of fearful collapse, in the short or long term, there is work to be done in helping people to discern what is truly loved and of deep value, what is heartfelt and worthy of sustaining;
11. Work to create and support resilient communities at personal and group level, and in how resources and the necessities of life are prioritised, sustained, maintained and shared;

⁴ Isaiah 40:31.

⁵ Harris J 2022. Britain is already in the grip of deep malaise – what happens when zero growth bites

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/jun/12/britain-deep-malaise-what-happens-zero-growth-bites-economy>. Accessed June 2022

12. We do not have to start with a blank sheet, resources from the wisdom of eldership, those nations who have learned to live lightly on the earth, the gifts of faith and wisdom teachings down the ages, ways of organising and decision making that bring nurturing forms of governance and avoid old systems of power and control – these and more are still readily available to us.

Facing the possibility of the collapse is a fierce thing to do. We are challenged at every level. It does not mean that we just give up in the face of impossible odds. We don't have to cease protesting, raising awareness, recycling, working, contributing or any of the other ways we seek to live lightly and respect the planet, each other and all of life. It does mean that we have to look deeply at the way we are with one another, how we offer support and cultivate community. It does mean that we have to be grown up and face the reality of what is ahead of us and the next generations in the not-too-distant future. It means we have to find the most healthy and compassionate responses. Deep Adaptation is not a summons to despair or denial, but a call to be the best persons we can be. Here. Now.

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Appendix

Deep Adaptation – for more information:-

<https://rebellion.global/blog/2021/12/10/global-newsletter-59/> Special report: a short guide to eco-anxiety. Accessed Jan 2022

Once you know. 2021 A Film by Emmanuel Cappellin in collaboration with Anne-Marie Sangla. Video Project: <https://www.videoproject.org/once-you-know.html>

Guidance on transition towns/adaptive/resilient communities:-

www.transitionnetwork.org

www.seedourfuture.org.uk

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