



Seminar summary: “Climate Crisis: Responses for Religions in Aotearoa”

St Andrews on the Terrace Conference Centre, Wellington, 8 April 2025

Scope and aim of seminar

An Aotearoa korero/talanoa around the interface between faith and secularity, science and scholarship and the global climate crisis. The desired outcome was a set of concrete key steps for producing leadership and ideas capable of unifying people of faith everywhere to act collectively on stewardship of the earth, in particular addressing climate change.

Abridged Programme and discussion questions

10.00 Mihi and welcome, health and safety, opening prayer, introductions. MC - Luamanuvao Dame Winnie Laban; Mihi - Mr Trevor Moeke; Opening prayer Rev Dr Feiloaiga Taulealeausumai

10.15 Prof Whitehouse keynote talk setting the context for discussion questions followed by questions to Prof Whitehouse

11.00 Introduction to groups and discussion questions, followed by group discussion questions A-D

- A. What scriptural support do religions provide for action on environmental challenges? (Facilitator Dr Mary Eastham)
- B. What forms of religious leadership are capable of mobilising action on the climate crisis, environmental degradation, and biodiversity loss? (Facilitator Ms Rachel Bostad)
- C. To what extent can perspectives from religion impact global audiences (reaching across borders, and not merely preaching to the converted)? (Facilitator Mr Peter Lang)
- D. How do religious and spiritual understandings of the environment differ in their content and potential impact from secular ones? (Facilitator Dr Richard Milne)

11.50 **Lunch break**

12.30pm resumption - In same groups consider discussion questions A-D: now focussed on practical steps - how the desired outcomes could be achieved within and across faith traditions.

- A. How can scriptural support for environmental action be made more relevant, meaningful, and motivating to people of faith?
- B. How can we foster more effective forms of spiritual leadership to enable action on the climate crisis?
- C. How can we bring religious faiths together more effectively to unite humanity at large behind positive climate action?
- D. How can we make religious and secular worldviews harmonise better/find common ground, to ensure that we get the full benefits of both in fostering cooperation to address environmental challenges?

1.10 **Plenary group regathers**; brief report-backs from each group. MC - Dr Paul Blaschke.
Followed by open facilitated plenary discussion. Facilitator Dr Peter Swain.

1.45 Invited commentaries on the seminar. Prof James Renwick and Rev Silvia Purdie.

1.55 Prof Whitehouse comments briefly on next steps in his research and MC comments briefly on where to for the findings reached today.

2.00 Thanks (Paul Blaschke) and closing mihi and prayer (Trevor Moeke and Rev Dr Fei).

Professor Harvey Whitehouse: summary of keynote talk

(key references are hyperlinked to coloured phrases)

At the Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion (CSSC) in Oxford University, UK, Professor Harvey Whitehouse and colleagues are studying how to tap into our deepest motivations to get us to act on global problems like climate change. Prof Whitehouse's new book [Inheritance: The Evolutionary Origins of the Modern World](#) is an attempt to summarise all the main discoveries in this significant area of modern psychology and behavioural sciences research.

The starting point for this work is that there are various predispositions that pervade human behaviour everywhere. For example:

- our shared moral compass,
- our natural respect for spiritual leaders,
- our intuition that we live on after we die,
- and our willingness to place the group before ourselves.

These features of human nature are deeply woven into our evolutionary history, and suggest that we cannot shake off our evolved psychology, because it will simply reemerge with each new generation. Our only hope is to learn to harness human nature more wisely.

Research at the CSSC has documented [seven cooperative principles found across the world](#) which also underlie human patterns of moral reasoning. These seven principles are:

- be loyal to your group,
- help your family,
- return favours,
- be brave,
- defer to superiors,
- divide resources fairly,
- respect others' property.

Detailed analysis of anthropological findings representing the diversity of all human cultures worldwide suggests that these seven forms of cooperation are judged morally good in all human societies, everywhere. Given that we all share the same basic moral intuitions – regardless of our cultural differences – there is huge potential here to harness these intuitions in our efforts to address global environmental challenges. For example, conservationists could in principle invoke all seven of the moral principles to urge governments to act fast to prevent biodiversity loss, rather than the [very restricted range currently being used](#).

CSSC researchers are also exploring the role of rituals and afterlife beliefs in fostering more future-minded approaches to the climate crisis. These features of human psychology also contribute to a very strong form of social cohesion – commonly found in families – known as '[identity fusion](#)'. A key question is whether the fusion of personal with group identity [could be extended to humanity at large](#), using shared rituals and acknowledging that all of us are descended from common ancestors. Prof

Whitehouse and colleagues believe that by creating commitment to a shared human family, we can [build global cooperation](#) and motivate action on environmental challenges. Although science must always be our main guide when trying to understand the causes of climate change and what needs to be done in response, climate science is not necessarily the best way to get people to act.

We need to broaden our approach to include the scientific study of our shared psychology, drawing also on the practical wisdom of diverse faiths and cultural traditions. As we come to understand ourselves better, we need to apply that knowledge to the way we do business, run our countries, and manage our natural resources. Together we need to build a better set of narratives and more potent forms of leadership to pull together to protect our planet and care for each other more effectively.

Plenary Discussion and Conclusion

The closing plenary session, facilitated by Dr Peter Swain, brought together key reflections and action-oriented insights from the discussion groups on the role of communities, faith, and collective responsibility in responding to climate change. The following themes emerged from the discussion:

1. Global Action through Collective Advocacy

Participants emphasised the importance of acting globally by mobilising international networks and advocacy groups. These global alliances can engage meaningfully in international forums and ensure that climate change remains a priority on the global agenda. This includes forming global observation groups to monitor commitments and progress.

2. Community Power: Thinking Beyond the Individual

Referencing Bill McKibben's statement, 'Stop thinking like an individual', the session underscored the need to shift from individualism to collective responsibility. Now more than ever, we must harness the strength of our communities to drive change at both local and global levels.

3. Faith in Action: The Work of A Rocha and Eco Church New Zealand

The work of A Rocha – a global Christian environmental organisation – was highlighted as an example of how faith communities can actively care for creation. In Aotearoa New Zealand, their Eco Church initiative equips church communities to engage in sustainable practices, such as waste reduction, native planting, and carbon reduction. Collaborations with local and regional councils, as well as iwi and hapu, illustrate the power of partnerships between secular and religious groups in climate action.

4. Local Initiatives with Global Links

At the grassroots level, particular faith communities have initiated projects such as regular beach cleanups. These efforts are aligned with international campaigns and designated global observance days like 'Beach Cleanup Day', reinforcing the local-global connection in tackling environmental degradation.

5. Moral and Spiritual Leadership in the Climate Crisis

The discussion addressed the urgent need to fill the moral vacuum that often surrounds climate inaction. Faith communities have a unique and courageous voice to speak into this void, calling for justice, stewardship, and compassion. Climate change was framed not only as an environmental issue but as a spiritual and economic crisis, calling for a radical shift in how we consume and share resources.

6. Building Resilient Communities

Resilience emerged as a key theme – resilient communities are better equipped to face climate challenges. This includes strengthening social cohesion, embedding sustainability practices, and nurturing a collective sense of purpose and agency.

7. *Aligning Passion, Purpose, and Global Need*

The session reflected on how individuals and communities might locate their contributions at the intersection of three key questions:

- a. What are my skills or what do I have to offer?
- b. What does the world need?
- c. What brings me joy or a sense of calling?

This framework offers a pathway for aligning personal passions with the urgent needs of our planet, fostering purpose-driven action.

8. *Conclusion: Faith, Dialogue, and Intergenerational Wisdom*

The session concluded with a powerful reflection on the role of faith and spirituality in shaping climate dialogue. Prof James Renwick and Rev Silvia Purdie offered valuable commentaries highlighting the need for scientific, faith and communities alike to work together to address climate change, sharing common values such as those described by our keynote speaker Prof Whitehouse.

Kaumatua Trevor Moeke and Rev Dr Feiloaiga Taulealeausumai closed with reflections and a closing prayer. Trevor shared Māori understandings of the world, including the spiritual relationship between people and the land. Concepts such as *poupou* (ancestral supports) and *papa* (earth) were invoked – when Māori children see *papa*, they stop crying, recognising the grounding and comfort of the earth as a living being.

The concept of *mokopuna* (grandchildren) was unpacked: *moko* signifies ancestral imprint, while *puna* signifies a spring or source – together expressing the sacred continuity of past, present, and future generations. In Aotearoa, the legal recognition of rivers and mountains as living persons with rights reflects this worldview, acknowledging the ancestors of what was, what is, and what is to come.

The perspective affirms that the creator – however one may define or understand it – is alive and present within all of us, and in all creation. It is a call to honour that sacred connection through care, respect, and action.



Keynote speaker Prof Harvey Whitehouse (C) with organisers Luamanuvao Dame Winnie Laban (L) and Dr Paul Blaschke (R)