MYTHS OF STABILITY

Putting capitalism before creation

“NEVER PLACE A PERIOD where God has placed a comma,” said the comedian Gracie Allen.

The comma, taken as a symbol by the United Church of Christ (UCC), suggests open-endedness, possibility, change, and growth. It sorts with ideas of process rather than completion, the “grand perhaps” of curiosity, and an undefensive position in a world of mutability.

It is an unusual theology, for many traditions seek the opposite, using myths of origin that describe a world created in welcomed immutability. Often, origin myths tell of a series of alterations to the world during its creation, a series of commas in the great paragraphs of life; once formed, however, the world was considered to be, well, “just so,” as Kipling’s stories suggest. The created world was finished and complete. Period. Both the Ancestors of the Dreaming and the God of the Old Testament sang a version of “Let it Be” to the world, and so it was. Stable. Constant. Reliable. In Egyptian myth, Khepri creates land with its foundation in Maat: law, order, and stability. According to Greek myth, the world was formed out of Chaos, air and water and matter existing in formlessness until the deities of Gaia and Uranus created form and order.

Paying attention to the natural world as our ancestors did, not as a dilettante hobby but as an instinctual means of survival, would lead to a belief, deep in the marrowbone, that climate itself does not change, and indeed to an insistence that it must not change or the fabric woven by the numinous creators would be torn. The climatic changes and ice ages in the past were to come about so gradually that they would be beyond the reach of (almost) any cultural memory: in their slowness was their psychological reassurance.

So for thousands of years, humanity felt itself to live in environs of essential changelessness, although the smaller shapings of life—seasonality, floods, migrations—were always in flux. The human mind watched and observed the alterations and rhythmic variations yet set it all in the context of a greater constancy: flux within fixity, mutability within larger immutability. Unpredictable weather within predictable climates. Climate change does, indeed, go against the grain of thousands of years of accumulated belief that the climate and larger environment is stable and must be so: if it
is not, the easefulness and stability of the human mind is threatened.

Thus, environmentalism is a “threat to the Christian faith,” says the Evangelical group the Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation. Concerns over climate change in particular are a threat to their spirituality. Anthropogenic climate change “doesn’t fit well with the biblical teaching that the earth is the result of the omniscient design, the omnipotent creation, and the faithful sustaining of the God of the Bible,” says E. Calvin Beisner, spokesperson for the alliance: “So it really is an insult to God.”

Within Christianity, the stability of the created world is reinforced by the importance of the idea of the immutability of God. Within that context evolution, too, positing change and process at the heart of creation, is apparently problematic for right-wing Christians: Genesisists have never liked geneticists. Both climate change and evolution transgress against the longed-for world of stability and security — things so precious to the human mind. It is rarer to think with the philosophy of the comma, of continuation and unknown futures (and it comes as no surprise that the UCC has become the first major religious body in the U.S. to vote to divest from fossil fuel companies).

It may be that the understandable human wish to believe in constancy and order overrides evidence to the contrary. But there is something deeper going on today when the Cornwall Alliance adds that environmentalism and fears of climate change are “deadly to prosperity.” Only very recently in human history has our focus shifted away from the natural world, toward the built environment and artificial surroundings — confined to an ambit of financial prosperity, commercialism, and the media. These things, for many people, appear to carry a weight of wanted constancy that the natural world used to bear. The media, manufacturing society in its own reflection, abandons the actual and enormous truths of the natural world and trains the public gaze on mass consumption and advertising and the economy. Those who believe in the stability of a divinely created world may smudge that belief into a fierce demand to maintain the stability of the artificial worlds of capitalism and consumerism, creating a new myth of stability within the economic, human-created system.

As in the old origin myths, modernity also offers a sense of flux within fixity: fashion has the mutability of weather, and designer labels may have the totemic aura of a rare-bird sighting. Celebrity stars may rise and fall, but the systemic churn of the entertainment industry continues. Share prices may rise and fall, but capitalism must be immutable.

The pseudoclimate of the economic system is given the attention and concern that the real climate needs. Financial well-being and economic stability are prized more than ecological well-being and climate stability. If there is one word whose changing usage over the last twenty years demonstrates this, it is the word sustainability, which was first used as an environmentally protective term when world leaders signed the Rio Declaration of 1992. Over the years, the phrase du jour became “sustainable development,” eliding both environmentally and economically protective meanings, and now “sustainable” is used to mean mere economic viability. It is not only an example of cynicism in practice, but also an accurate register of public priorities.

When Evangelical Christians speak of environmentalism as a threat to their prosperity, the dollar says it all: In God We Trust, claiming in capitalism an ultimate confidence and requiring toward it the stance of stewardship with which an ideal Christianity might have treated the world. It is as if the economic system, rather than the environment, is divinely created: and not just for right-wing Christians but for all those who have transferred their attention from natural to artificial surroundings.

The ancient belief that the environment is stable, the faith that whatever it is that surrounds humanity is (and must be) constant, has been transferred from nature to “the system.” Perhaps the human mind doesn’t just happen to believe in the stability of its environs but dearly wants to. Perhaps humanity, to a large measure, has shifted not only its attention but its sense of psychological stability from the natural to the built environment. Perhaps the widespread refusal to believe in climate change is due to a fear that such a belief threatens the pseudoclimate, the artificial, overarching, and overreaching system — which, indeed, must be disrupted if we are to address real climate change. Threaten that system and many people feel their minds under threat, which accounts for the fury directed at climate change activism.

In the end, the angry denial of climate change — of climate “chaos” — may represent an unacknowledged and atavistic fear of primordial chaos.

The angry denial of climate change may represent an unacknowledged and atavistic fear of primordial chaos.

Jay Griffiths is the author of Kith: The Riddle of the Childscape; she lives in Wales.