

Podcast Colonialism, Indus Rev, and Climate

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Suan Oxley 00:28

Welcome to Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host Susan Oxley, from Seattle, Washington in the United States. This is the series Climate Brewing, where we interview scientists and presenters who have given webinars as part of the Community of Christ, North American Climate Justice Zoom series, "All of Creation, From Crises to Transformation". We're also interviewing some of those who have dedicated their lives and their attention to mitigating global warming. And so, in that respect, I will be interviewing my good friend, Rod Downing, the Chairman of the North American Climate Justice Team.

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Rod's been a student of the environment for the past 40 years, and, along with a number of other folks has watched with dismay, as global warming has progressed, and climate has been increasingly disruptive. He's a dedicated advocate for change, and he's raised his voice in a wide variety of ways. Rod has sponsored political actions. He's taught classes, he's written resolutions for the Community of Christ World Conference, he has joined demonstrations and marches through the years, and he's very well versed in history and justice issues. Rod joins us now from Vancouver, British Columbia, to discuss the topic, "Colonialism, the Industrial Revolution, and Climate Change".

02:05

Rod, let's start off with our conversation with some clarification of the word 'colonialism' . Now, when I was a child, teachers taught me that colonialism was the process of bringing civilization to colonies that were settled by European countries, it was considered a positive, beneficial phase of world development. It's come to me in something very different. Tell me about that and how the term is used today.

Rod Downing 02:37

Sure, and first of all, thanks, Susan, for having me on this podcast and you're very generous introduction.

02:48

Yes, colonialism is one of those dynamics that basically we have inherited as such, it's what I would classify as part of our worldview makeup. And that's where I want to start. And beware, I often start answering questions that nobody's even asking yet!

But it's just a bit of a background, that worldview, to me is a very important concept, because it's, it's simply the way the world is, we never think about it. It's what we've inherited - inherited through: from

our parents, to our friends, to the school system, to the society. You know, that's just the way things are. And it's only when you can sort of take that step back that you start to see, oh, my gosh, look at this.

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And one of the things you can look at is, of course, colonialism, and in particular, bouncing things off of say, our Enduring Principles, we want as much as possible for the world and our worldview and our world dynamics to be in sync.

So finally, **colonialism**. Funny, you should mention, you had a positive reaction to it. I'm from Canada, and I learned that very well; maybe it wasn't even a classic down in the States - I simply always presumed it was - you know, "in 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue". It was simply a snappy way to know, okay, it was 1492 that it occurred. But we all learned that in Canada, even though it really only indirectly affected us. The explorers didn't reach our shores till a bit later, and we've got a bit of a different history in that respect

So, colonialism is a very major, one of those very major dynamics that's part of this worldview. And I saw it as well. It was simply taught, you know - it was the "Age of Exploration". I mean, as a boy - that sounds you know, that sounds exciting - going in exploring a . . . brand new worlds, brand new peoples, all kinds of, you know.

So it had those very positive, exciting, and eventually progressive, that is, hey, not only are we going out into the world, but we're, we're bringing civilization, we're helping all these people that we meet, we're bringing wonderful things to them. Now without. . .

06:05

Of course, colonialism - this could be an entire university course. So you know, you'll have to, hopefully, give me a little slack for making very broad brush strokes, because there's so much more to it than you can put into a podcast, but for sure we can get a sense of the effect of colonialism relevant for today.

So colonialism actually has a few different forms and definitions. We'll go with the simplest going from the root word of Colony, that there is one basic thrust in its definition, that simply has to do with this colonizing aspect - that technology back then had gotten to the point of being able to build large ships that could go big distances; there was the trading routes that always had to go over land, and darn it all, boy, if you could just get some ships doing it, it'd be much better.

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So, be aware of that - whoa, that means there's economics already sneaking into the picture of the colonial dynamics! So it's a combination of, you know, the exploring exciting new domains. But oh, yes, economic reasons in there. And so, part of the name came, you know, from this sense of enticing people to come to these lands that were being discovered - Columbus sailed the ocean blue - to come and actually live in these lands.

For some people, you know, they'd been through the 100 Years War, 200 Years War - Europe was not quite utopia - lots of fighting and wars that have gone on, lots of persecution. So many people were easily enticed to come to these new colonies.

08:37

And that, in some sense, is where the root word comes from. The colony, colonial, colonial-ism. Now the "ism", of course - that means there's a bigger dynamic there. And that simply is that these people didn't come as blank slates, they came with this European kind of superiority complex, and I'll leave it at that.

Suan Oxley 09:13

So, from the perspective of the nations who were promoting colonialism, one of the things driving them was a hunt for resources, wasn't it?

Rod Downing 09:25

Yes, that's why I say, you know, even from the very beginning there was that economic desire.

Now, that became fueled by what they discovered once they got there. They discovered all kinds of things that of course, they had no idea, you know, of course, the gold, the precious metals, gold and silver and things like that. But everything from lumber and to eventually, of course, slaves and the slave trade, you know, that was property as well viewed during that time.

So, yes, it very much and that then connects it very clearly, to our main focus of the environmental aspects of colonialism - is this growing desire to extract resources that were valuable, and of course, that changed over the centuries from, as I said that, the lumber and the and the precious metals and things like that, and then eventually coal. And when the Industrial Revolution came along, of course, those were part of it. And, you know, again, as, as the Western world had an appetite for certain resources, they were they for sure, went looking and taking, exploiting at the expense of the indigenous people those resources.

Suan Oxley 11:35

So how would you describe at that time, we're talking about the, the 1500s 1600s 1700s? How would you describe the world view among developed nations at that time, concerning the use of resources?

Rod Downing 11:53

Sure. And I'll broaden that simply a bit. Sure. Because I want to bring in the religious aspect of this, because this was fairly foundational for some people. Of course, for other people, they could care less about the religious aspects, they just wanted to make money.

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But what is essential for any religious community to be aware of, is that at the time, 1492, Columbus, the year following that, the Pope had what's called a Papal Bull. In other words, it has his full authority behind it, called the "Doctrine of Discovery".

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So this was a very important piece of paper and would inform then the people who are involved in, in going out and exploring and discovering and all of this, because this Doctrine of Discovery basically meant - again, over simplified - but basically, if I had, if I, or we could just simply take Columbus, you know, Columbus went, he hit some land, originally thought it was India. But anyway, when he got there, he went back and said, Okay, I have found this land, he planted a flag there - that was part of this doctrine that you had, you had to, it had to be a land where there were no other European settlers, at which point you could plant the flag, say it was “discovered”, and claim it for your whatever country you were representing, which for Columbus at the time was, was Spain.

But you know, Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, Belgium, England, you know, all became very active participants in that. But that's, that's quite critical because in terms of, well, then this land then becomes, any of the resources in this land then become that of, you know, Britain or Spain or whoever.

So, that really fueled the explosive growth then during the later centuries for that, and you will note that the Papal Bull didn't give any account to existing peoples - or sorry pre-existing peoples – that could have been there.

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And I want to make that I want to make that extremely clear because, you know, colonialism and racism sort of intertwine in amongst all of this and, and part of is this religious dimension that comes in. The Papal Bull was very clear - If there weren't European people there, there just weren't, in essence, people - it was empty land. And even if it could, even if it was full of indigenous people at the time, they were considered nothing, absolutely nothing in terms of this whole process.

So again, that's just part of some of the flavoring that, you know, that helped form the lands that we now know, that shaped the lands and everything else. That's part of that what I said, that worldview that we don't even think about, often don't even know about, it's just the way it was.

Suan Oxley 16:28

So the people of the land, the indigenous people, they found there really were seen as simply one more resource to be exploited. They were a resource of labor, a resource of energy to be used and cast aside. They were not seen as human beings, but only as things to be used and converted, if possible to Christianity.

Rod Downing 16:54

Yes, absolutely. I shouldn't say “absolutely” - there are always exceptions there. There were voices that, you know, if our church's Enduring Principles about the worth of all, well, I mean, yeah, all you have to do is go to Genesis 1, God created, you know, in essence, everyone in God's image, and that sense of inherent worth and dignity that everybody is due. Occasionally, there would be people who would recognize this is not right. And, and but, you know, those voices were basically largely lost in this ensuing scramble and, and so yes, the indigenous people, they either had to flee or easily became labor with, you know, they do the labor, but all of the precious resources go back to Europe, and they

get nothing in return other than disease, and which, of course, because they hadn't been exposed to many of our diseases, wiped out populations.

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And I'll simply add an anecdote. In Massachusetts, in the early years of the settlement, there was a governor there, who in essence, said that, with the disease having wiped out most of the native people, said that, in essence, "the Lord has cleared the land that we possess". In other words, harkening back to a bit of your earlier question, "how did the people view it?" - well, there you have, that's not quite an exact quote, but pretty close - that wiping out of people through disease was seen as God's will!

Because of course, we were the superior people. And we weren't even sure at times that these indigenous peoples were human. So why did it matter? And there was a quote, simply to give you an example of, of how all of this was unfolding. And again, of course, there were exceptions. And, you know, treaties being made and people trying to do better, but yeah, a real mix. The worst of it comes through at times.

Suan Oxley 20:15

So what's the connection between colonialism as it occurred in the past, and the climate change problem that began to emerge with the Industrial Revolution - what's the connection there?

Rod Downing 20:34

Sure, yes. Yeah, quite simple. We'll just hop and skip, hop and skip over a few 100 years. And I simply say that in jest simply to remind everyone that, yeah, there are a lot of fascinating things if you want it personally, if you want to dig in deeper to it.

21:02

But the results, of course, harkening back again, to my childhood, 1492, and the Age of Exploration and saying, "Wow, that was really exciting". But I did know about – and this is now a bit of a pejorative term to call them "Indian" reserves and the Indian people - but that those were the words used at the time. And in fact, Canada has the Indian Act, again, harkening back to the wording that was used at the time.

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The point being, even when growing up as a kid, I saw this partly as this exciting thing, this progressive thing that we were doing by educating and clothing and all of that, these people {but} that there was also this disconnect, because I would say, Well, if that went so well, why are there all these Indian reservations? And why does every time I see a TV camera, at one of the reserves, it looks more like a Third World - what we call back then a Third World area - in, you know, a First World country like Canada?

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So there was this disconnect, even back then. So to help connect those dots a little more, which is what the heart of your question is: What happened is, this colonialism, of course, we were the might, it was one of these 'might is right' dynamics, we for sure, had the might, and we defeated any attempts by the indigenous people to maintain stewardship over their lands, and we stuck them in reserves, and we did

horrible things like, I think you have a trail of tears in the state's legacy. And here in Canada, we have horrible legacies of residential schools and such.

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So, that all comes out of that colonial era and mindset. You know, remembering that Papal doctrine that didn't consider them, didn't even consider them! You know, they weren't even human to be worth considering back then! And, then just simply that greedy desire to extract resources at any, any cost.

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The most convenient thing once you have defeated the enemy is to go stick them someplace where you don't have to think about them at least too often. {And so slave them} Or enslave them, yes, exactly as depending on the circumstances. And so, the reserve, the Indian reserves then became, well, where's the land we don't care about? Where are the areas we don't care about? That's where we'll put them. And that's where that starts to come in.

As well as our desire - you mentioned it earlier, and absolutely, that was the case - we wanted to civilize them. We, if we were going to do anything with them, we wanted to educate them about our ways of doing things and seeing things, and try and crush and eliminate their sense of whatever their sense was we didn't care. And again, there were exceptions. There were people who saw the real value of what they were doing, but we sure did not. We simply wanted to "remove the Indian in the Indian".

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Fortunately, oh, thank heavens, fortunately, we were unsuccessful. They were - the First Nations, the indigenous people - had a resilience and an ability to endure and come through that. Both within society, and I'll want to be clear, even in the environmental movement, there is some repentance that needed to take place, because the environmental movement, you know - I was involved in it starting in the late 70s, or 70s, somewhere along there - and, you know, it was an entirely white movement. And it wasn't until the last 10 or 15 years where we said, oh, yeah, gee, the indigenous people, they've been on this land for 1000s of years, maybe they've got something valuable to say.

So, there was this sense, even in the environmental movement, at least, the way I see it. That you see how insidious that colonial mentality can show up - again, worldview, you know, it's just the way it is. You don't think about it in the environmental movement, so focused on nature and try and my gosh, we were destroying things at such a rate, you know, they were just frantically trying to save what could be saved.

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But utterly blind, to the indigenous wisdom that we had previously been trying to snuff out. And fortunately, had. So it was interesting, very quickly, to watch us go from Yes - I've had decades of activist work of various kinds, including protests and things - to see this, for instance, the protests be a, go from completely white dominated, to, oh, we'll do at least do a land acknowledgement, WE would do a land acknowledgement, to letting oh, maybe we should let the indigenous people, you know, maybe bless the land, to letting them say a little piece of something at the beginning. And gradually, it got - and

I'm speaking here, living in the west coast of British Columbia, the Vancouver area – where, pre-COVID, you know, starting a few years ago, some of the protests now are completely, the indigenous people are completely in charge, and we simply join them.

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Part of that was, you know, we had come so close to snuffing out their wisdom and such that they had to struggle, you know, struggle with so much trauma that we had inflicted on them over the generations. But they have found their voice now. And I mean, to me, that is just one of the most wonderful things you know, that I, that I could say! They found their voice. And it's, it's, it'll be a blessing to us all if we simply, my keyword is dialogue, you know, everybody is equal. But for sure, thank heavens, they are finding their voice in this.

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So there there's the both the horrible or at least a glimpse of some of the horrible things that colonialism and our western culture has wrought on the people, and the gradual dawning on our part and on the part of the indigenous people to find their voice and hear their wisdom.

Suan Oxley 30:34

I'd like to get back to that rod. But let me just try to make sure that we've got the link clear. Colonialism was one of the things that really drove the Industrial Revolution. The resources that were coming from these other worlds, these other lands, fueled the Industrial Revolution that was built on inventions. And that industrial revolution, and the continued greed for more and more resources, more and more luxury, more and more ease in living - is what caused a lot of the carbon emissions to build up during the industrial revolutions. Is that not correct?

Rod Downing 31:31

Yes. Nice and succinctly stated, you know, in this broad sweep. Most people will, or most climate scientists will, or one of the points where they will start is basically somewhere in the mid-1800s, with the start of the Industrial Revolution, started with coal. And what that is, is a very dense form of energy that we didn't used to have, we had to use previously, it was wood, or whatever.

But this much more dense form allowed for industry to take-off, go farther, expand. And that was the start, then of the Industrial Revolution, which then, of course, had a second kind of bump, when that went from coal to oil, as oil was discovered, and oh my gosh, even a denser, more suitable, easier form to get your energy with. And with that, the search for that around the world, the extractive processes around the world, and to complete the link, going back to my earlier statement, - where I said, Well, what are, you know, back in the earlier days, that continued up through to even today: Where will we put these indigenous people? - in the worst land, in the land that we don't want.

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And so, there is part of the linkage, and hence the term **eco-racism**. There was this structural racism, of putting the reserves or the people in these worst places, which happened to be where the big industries were starting to form because of the coal and then the oil, and such

So they would be downwind of all this, they would catch all the fumes that we wouldn't, you know, we'd want to be upwind of it for sure. So, and actually, you can see that pattern in a lot of cities, find out where the prevailing winds are, and you'll know half the time where the wealthy side of the city is going to be and the poor side of the city. The poor side will always be downwind of the toxic materials, because of course, it went from oil, and from oil come all the plastics, and with all the plastics come all the toxics.

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And in one of our sessions, we even deal with what's called "Cancer alley" - a couple of our sessions we deal with, or at least briefly mentioned, Cancer Alley, which is a very clear illustration of this point. So yes, that's how it absolutely ties into the Industrial Revolution. And then what that kick-started and of course, continues to this day. And along with that, that systemic aspect that we put people on the margins into marginal land.

I have a very clear illustration in my head. This was part of my awakening - I was as blind and as culpable as anyone in the early days. And I remember, I got this one image: in the background where these huge oil tanks, you know, storage tanks. And in front of that was this big ditch, you know, 10-12 feet, I don't know, big enough to swim in. And that's where the native people swam, because they live right next door to it, again the lousiest land around. And that sort of ditch / creek that they were swimming in was, was extremely toxic. And they didn't know. And yet there they would be all summer long, swimming in it. So you know, there's how you can start to see some of the tie-ins and the horrible implications that can ensue.

Suan Oxley 36:28

So even now, today, as we begin talking about solutions, and cleaning up the atmosphere, cleaning up areas, making progress in terms of electricity and clean air, clean, green energy, things like that - the areas we target for those kinds of solutions tend to be the wealthy. We usually don't start those solutions in the areas where the impoverished people are living. They are usually the last ones to be considered as we consider clean energy solutions.

Rod Downing 37:19

Yes, great point! It goes back to how thankful I am that the indigenous people are finding a voice. And we can see this in North America, but it's really around the world because this is, one has to recognize how global this problem is.

But even here in North America, yes, the wealthy are those who have the ear to the politicians. And that's where policies get made and why they get made in the manner in which they did. That's why in the first place, those reserves were put in the land that nobody else wanted. And marginalized people continue to this day, to suffer simply because they don't have that voice. They don't have that ear to the politicians. Why do they why would the politicians care about them? You know, they're probably not going to vote; if they do, you know, I can find a, you know, a base or jiggle the district lines of voting so that I can still get my majority vote. And so, yes, there are dynamics on many layers that have been against the marginalized. And in particular, talking about the indigenous communities, and hence the Eco racism.

Suan Oxley 39:18

Well, we're even hearing that the United Nations Green Fund, which was designed to be used for developing nations to enhance their energy uses in green ways. And some of those funds have been deflected to wealthier nations and to corporations and things like that, rather than going directly to the developing nations that they were designed for. So even there, we're hearing of this colonial view that the marginalized, the impoverished, those that are simply resources to be used are not are not worthy of the help and the solutions that they were designed to implement.

Rod Downing 40:12

Yes, it remains alive and well. Tragically, as

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an issue.

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I tend to say, we still live in a very primitive world,

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largely because the highest level we've been able to achieve in a practical sense is the nation state. And thus any nation is All it cares about is its own self interests.

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And hence, yes, you get exactly what you have mentioned that, yes, we, technically we, in the developed, developed world should be putting billions of dollars into these funds for the developing nations

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who we have ravaged through the centuries over what we've just talked about.

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But the reality is, yes, self interest makes us very stingy at doing this, makes us very crafty at delaying and deflecting these types of processes. But at the heart, yes, it is. Very clear justice issue. And, and a people concerned about it, such as

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Community of Christ with our enduring principles in the scriptures that go with that. Definitely, that call to be in the forefront is a call that, yes, involves all levels up to that brand level of the UN deliberating bodies and, and how those funds get distributed in the manner the equitable manner that they're intended for, because otherwise, yes, self interest, will always supersede all else. And failure will be, you know, failure of Justice will be the result, as it tends to be.

Suan Oxley 42:39

So to summarize, the colonialism, in ancient times, or not ancient times, but colonialism, starting in the Age of Exploration, the Doctrine of Discovery, the rape of resources and peoples in the colonies, as we call them - is the foundation for the endemic racism that continued to be expressed through the generations. It is one of the things that led to the greed, the desire for luxuries that fueled the Industrial Revolution.

It provided a lot of the resources that continued to be exploited during the Industrial Revolution that led to carbon emissions, and the global warming that we are now experiencing. That really took-off during the Industrial Revolution. And the colonialism mindset continues to inform our "solutions" for not only the placement of marginalized people, but also where we implement solutions for climate change, and what solutions we actually are excited about and care about, and the way we fund those solutions. So colonialism has a piece in all of those aspects, right, straight through, and needs to be addressed, acknowledged, identified and destroyed.

Rod Downing 44:42

Yes. Again, you know, these . . . colonialism is, goes all the way back to that sense of worldview. Changing worldviews is an incredibly difficult task to achieve. But that doesn't mean it's hopeless. Regardless of how long it takes, yeah, we've got to be able to take that step back and try and bend that arc, as Martin Luther King Jr used to say, towards justice, regardless of how long that takes, and it, it's, a pervasive, insidious thing, it will always try and pop up in one form or another. And we've mentioned many.

45:44

Every once in a while, I get thinking - My gosh, what a different world we would have had if we had listened, if we had dialogued with the indigenous people from the beginning, than rather said, Oh, well, we know, we've got alphabets, we've got, you know, histories of Plato and Aristotle, and, you know, we're clearly superior

But if we had instead listened to the people at the time, and what I'm thinking of is, they knew how to live within - which is our one of our most difficult problems - they knew how to live within the boundaries of nature, to live within that, to be part of that, to have a sense of nature. And, and that what we are, we are simply part of nature, and we have to find our appropriate place, if we had only, you know, allow that to seep into our worldview, we would not be in the mess that we're in today.

But because we tried to, you know, annihilate, all of those types of thinking, now we have this more onerous task of trying to reclaim that, and thank heavens, that the indigenous peoples, as I say, still have that sense and might help, again, in dialogue us, with us all together to achieve a more equitable outcome.

Suan Oxley 47:33

So in conclusion, Rod, would you simply make some sort of a summary statement about how you see Community of Christ being part of the solution?

Rod Downing 47:46

Sure. There is a reason I'm in I stay in this church! And, and part of that is what I call at its most fundamental level, a sense of openness is that the church - human institution, as well as divine, so we do sort of stumble around, lumber along - but the prophetic call always is seeping through to us, that call to love your neighbors, yourself, and the call to be in the forefront. Take a look at the last few scriptures from you know, sort of from Doctrine and Covenants, well, sort of 149 and up, but definitely 156 and up and so on, it gets louder and clearer. That prophetic call to pay attention, to focus on the marginalized, to be in the forefront of all the destructive nature. So, yes.

And our Enduring Principles are a marvelous resource for us to sort of bounce off of, to say, Well, are we sort of on the right track or not? If we're going to start taking this seriously, oh, my gosh, if we start taking this really seriously - Whoa, you know, we could, we may be not the largest organization in the world, but for sure, we can be the leaven that God's Spirit continually coaxes us to become in the world. So, yes, it's why I stay in the church because of the these wonderful visions and affirmations of what can be, what should be and what we're called to do.

Suan Oxley 50:04

Thank you, Rod so much. I really appreciate your taking the time to share your perspective, your expertise, your sweeping understanding of systems and history and the concerns of justice. I appreciate it very much

Rod Downing 50:20

Well, thank you, thank you very much. It was a wonderful conversation that I, at least, found a wonderful conversation with you, and yes, wish everybody the best as, you know, we all have our own ways to have to discern and re-organize - if I can use an old term - our way of living and under God's Good Spirit. Yeah, that's our best hop!. So thank you.