

Christian Care for the Environment:

A contemporary problem in the light of long-standing Christian tradition

Introduction

For several decades now the protection and care of the environment have been important social issues. Environmentalism has sometimes been accused of being a form of pantheism, a competitor to Christian theology. But Christians know that our relationship with the triune God demands that we care for the environment in which we see the self-expression of the Trinity.

The Creator made the cosmos; the air, the water and the earth; plants and trees; birds and fish; animals and human beings, are all good gifts of God. Humanity is called to steward, to nurture and protect these good gifts. In the Incarnation, the Word became flesh; in the person of Jesus God became radically present in creation, part of the created order, the ecology of this world. The Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, continues to be active in the ongoing creation of all things, bringing each creature into communion with the Trinity.

From the perspective of our responsibility to care for creation, the churches have important contributions to make to the environmental movement. This contribution is ecumenical; Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Churches are united in their concern for creation.

Recognising that "people, created in the image of God, have a special responsibility as servants in reflecting God's creating and sustaining love, to care for the creation and to live in harmony with it,"¹ one of the programmes of the World Council of Churches is [Justice, diakonia and responsibility for creation](#). In 2002, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference' Social Justice Statement: [A New Earth: The environmental challenge](#), affirmed that Christians have an ethical duty to respect the gifts of creation, to give thanks for them, and to use them in accord with the will of God, as best we can interpret it. In 1989 the late Patriarch Dimitrios, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, designated the first of September as the day for the protection of the environment, with [messages](#) given every year.²

Care for the environment is an ecumenical issue in two senses: it affects the whole *oikoumene*; and it is a concern that unites Christians from across the denominational spectrum. It is in this spirit of ecumenism that the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC offers these reflections on this particular theme.

Our references are set out under three major headings: **Scriptural**; **Theological**; and **Moral**. A final section provides selected **References** from the WCC, the Ecumenical Patriarch, and the Anglican, Catholic and Uniting Churches.

One of the purposes of developing this resource is to convey to Christians, if they need to be convinced, that care for the environment is a legitimate and necessary Christian concern. The work of the WCC on this issue goes back as far as the nineteen-eighties. Similarly, the Ecumenical Patriarch has made an annual statement on the topic since 1989. This resource draws on their work, and the work of other parts of the ecumenical community.

¹ WCC World Convocation on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation. *Ten Affirmations on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation*. Seoul, 1990.

² Bishop M. Mikail, *Peace with Nature: Orthodoxy and the Environment*, 2003, p. 57.

The Place and Witness of Scripture

As Christians, we begin with engagement with the Scriptures and the central themes that arise. In the creation narratives found at the very start of the Book of Genesis the whole created order is said to be of God and is declared to be 'very good' (Gn 1.31).

So the glory of God seen in creation (and in Romans 1) is to be cherished and honoured. Yet all is not well. Beside the intended harmony that is witnessed to, for example in Isaiah, yet drought, flood and fire, and the degradation and desertification of the environment (at least for us) are ever present realities.

These harsh realities make us reflect both on our duty of stewardship towards creation, and our misuse of the world that is entrusted to our care.

Furthermore, nature is not 'benign' in terms of our limited understanding. The themes of 'apocalypse' and the formation of a 'new heavens and a new earth' (Rev. 21 ff) show that this creation is essentially in transition: we have here 'no abiding city' (Heb13.14). This is brought out all the more fully in the episode of the Transfiguration where Jesus manifests his glory (Mark 9.2ff), and in the promise that we too will be transfigured into copies of his glorious body (Philippians 3.21).

In short, the Scriptures affirm that all creation waits with eager longing for a deeper and a more complete fulfilment, 'the same freedom and glory as the children of God' (Rom 8.21).

This hope of a future creation beyond all imagining informs our attitude to the present environment in all its aspects.

Key Scriptural ideas and motifs

These are widely shared across Christian traditions.

- Year of Jubilee – *Leviticus 25*
- Intended harmony – *Isaiah 61*
- Glory of God in creation – *Genesis, Romans 1, Psalm 19*
- Effect of incarnation and resurrection – *Romans 4*
- New heaven, new earth – *Revelation*
- Transfiguration – *Apocalypse 21:5*
- Apocalypse – *Revelation 5*
- God's image in creation – *Joshua 2:11, Romans 1:20, Psalm 104*
- N.T. Ear of wheat – *Sabbath*
- Misuse of creation – *Noah*
- Stewardship – *Isaiah 24, Leviticus 25*
- Eschatological – no lasting city – *Hebrews*
- Theosis – environmental concern within orthodoxy based in theosis – *2 Peter 1-4*
- Creation waiting for redemption dependent on the redemption of the Sons of God – *Romans 8*
- Past misuse of biblical material – e.g. *Genesis 1:26*

A suggested follow-up using these scriptural perspectives

Using the above key ideas and the preceding statement, examine a statement by one of the Australian Churches (see the Further Reading section at the end of this document) and see what scriptural perspectives are most important for that statement. You could choose a statement from your own church or look at more than one Church and compare scriptural perspectives.

Reflections on Theological Imperatives

Theological reflection, which involves engagement with the scriptures, celebration of the sacraments, and the lived experience of the Christian community, can provide a rich insight into our potential as humans within the created order.

Traditional Christian theology sees the relationship between God and the world as continuous. God did not create the world 'in the past' but is continually engaged in the process of creation. Neither is God to be seen only as 'up there' and remote while the created order just 'ticks over'.

The Christian experience understands that human beings are fundamentally involved in the world. On the one hand, creation is limited by the effects of human wilfulness (sin) and at the same time it is received as a gift from God the Creator. It forms part of God's salvific plan, as is humanity. As gift, we have the task of stewardship and care.

Furthermore, the Christian community uses the gifts of the earth to express its essential character. In celebrating its rituals by using the 'stuff' of creation - water, bread, wine and oil - the Christian community continues to affirm the goodness and importance of the physical order. In fact, the sacraments are an expression of the essential doctrine of the incarnation which teaches that the Word of God became flesh and took to himself all humanity and all creation. Indeed, in his resurrection he takes us with him into a life without limitation, beyond time and space. He will transfigure us on the pattern of his own glorious flesh.

At times the Christian tradition has seemed to be 'world denying' and only interested in 'heaven'. The physical world had to be endured or even destroyed so that God could 'start again'! The stronger tradition affirms that this world is in constant communion with its Creator; and that in the fullness of time God's Kingdom will result in a transformed creation, 'a new heaven and a new earth'. The future will be infinitely more wonderful than the past, and we humans are involved in bringing this about.

Contemplation of the great mystery of Jesus' resurrection will show how God uses the 'stuff' of the creation - the human body - and transfigures it into a new way of being; not casting it aside but affirming it, and bringing it to a completion beyond all our imagining.

Key Theological Ideas

Insights shared across many (but not all) traditions. These are ways of reflecting upon God's word in Scripture, God's relationship to us and to rest of the created order.

- Transfiguration of the world– nature becoming an icon
- Essential limitation of nature (nature as witness)
- Effect of incarnation, resurrection, regeneration of nature – use and transformation
- Apocalypse
- Stewardship
- Reverence for the environment (no ordinary planet)
- Respect for the created order
- Ecological conversion
- Glory of God in Creation/The environment as a source of Revelation
- Nature becomes more human, humans become more natural
- Regeneration
- The Sacraments – both use and transform nature – water, oil, bread, wine
- Creation as good – but disrupted, 'the fall' affects humans/affects nature.

A suggested follow-up using these theological perspectives

Using the above key ideas and the preceding statement, examine one of the statements on Ecology issues by the Ecumenical Patriarchate (see the Further Reading section at the end of this document) and see what theological perspectives are relied on. You might find it interesting to compare/contrast these theological underpinnings with those used in a statement by one of the Australian Churches.

Moral Imperatives for Care of the Environment

From a Christian point of view, God's earth is sacred. But the moral categories that western civilisation has inherited, in large part from its Judeo-Christian tradition, are neither as definitive nor as sensitive in dealing with devastation of the earth and its non-human life forms and systems as they are with respect to homicide, suicide and genocide. Devastation and elimination of entire species and possibly of the planet itself do not feature strongly in our moral sensitivities nor are they yet firmly planted in our moral discourse. Some environmental moralists like William Berry³(1914-2009) critique an exclusively human focus for morality that appears to exclude considerations of other species, life forms and of the planet itself.

³ William Berry, who also wrote under his religious name Fr Thomas Berry CP, was a US born Catholic theologian who wrote extensively on ecology. Newsweek magazine once described him as a provocative and leading writer on ecology. The current crisis of the environment was described by Berry himself as primarily a spiritual crisis. <http://www.springerlink.com/content/p22467252wmu04r7/>

Morality is deficient if it suggests that God cares only for the well being and salvation of human kind, leaving us free to exploit the earth and its resources for our own ends without taking any responsibility for what we have been given or for what we will pass on to future generations.

A more pertinent morality is therefore needed to address current environmental and ecological problems that have their roots in the actions of preceding generations and which are likely to have their greatest impact on generations to come. This morality will need to be based more firmly on values of sustainability, respect for the earth and its biological systems, humility, frugality and solidarity with all those who share the planet with us.

- Sustainability is a key idea that points to the limited resources we have and to our responsibility to future generations.
- Respect for the earth and its environment should be a consequence of our knowing that the earth and its life forms are expressions of God's wisdom and glory.
- Humility is necessary as an antidote to placing ourselves or our national concerns ahead of everyone else. It is also a corrective to placing "human" considerations and interests ahead of everything else.
- Frugality calls for care and restraint in the way we produce and consume. Countries that have produced and consumed with little restraint are among the chief agents of environmental degradation and devastation.
- Solidarity reminds us that those who are likely to suffer most from the immediate effects of environmental damage have possibly done the least to bring about the problem. Developed economies need to think about solidarity with those whose resources have been taken. Unsustainable patterns of production and consumption need to be seen as creating a debt owed to all who are linked

Key Moral Ideas

Shared by people across denominations and from no religious tradition

- Misuse of environment – injustice, consumerism
- Effects of greed and exploitation – unregulated and institutionalised
- Carelessly or unwittingly failing to understand the implications and effects of past actions and uses *including* their cumulative effects, and not seeing the whole picture.
- Effects of rapid expansion of global trade and marketing of resources.
- Limitations of relying on national and local regulatory approaches.
- Lack of confidence in the efficacy of international/world regulatory agencies.
- Individualism and self interest – personal and collective
- Appreciation of beauty and fragility of nature
- Envisioning possibilities for regeneration and growth
- Importance and intrinsic value of the environment, looking beyond economic value.
- Preserving and caring for the environment for generations to come

- Response to extreme weather events and environmental conditions, with their potential and actual impact on humanity (e.g. rising seas, tsunamis, bushfires, flood, drought).

A suggested follow-up using these moral perspectives

Using the above key ideas and the preceding statement, take one of the documents issued by the World Council of Churches together with the Vatican statement "*Ten Commandments for the Environment*" (see the Further Reading section at the end of this document) and compare the moral perspectives adopted in these two statements. You might want to look also at the moral perspectives embedded in one of the statements issued by one of the Australian Churches.

Resources for Further Reading

WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES RESOURCES ON THE INTERNET

The WCC climate change and water programme:

<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/programmes/justice-diakonia-and-responsibility-for-creation/climate-change-and-water.html>

Ecumenical Water Network (EWN):

<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/programmes/justice-diakonia-and-responsibility-for-creation/climate-change-and-water/ecumenical-water-network-ewn.html>

Complete Documents and Statements on Climate Change:

<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/justice-diakonia-and-responsibility-for-creation/climate-change-water.html>

Earlier Documents (1997-2006) on Climate Change; Water; Faith, Science and Technology; Economic globalisation and ecology; Caring for life: <http://wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/jpc/earthdocs.html#cc>

THE ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE ON ECOLOGY

Environment Day (September 1) Messages:

<http://www.ec-patr.org/docdisplay.php?lang=en&cat=11>

Symposia at the Halki Ecological Institute:

<http://www.ec-patr.org/docdisplay.php?lang=en&cat=11>

Ecological Messages:

<http://www.ec-patr.org/docdisplay.php?lang=en&cat=13>

Amazon: Source of Life:

<http://www.ec-patr.org/docdisplay.php?lang=en&cat=36>

Religion, Science and the Environment Movement
<http://www.rsesymposia.org/>

ROMAN CATHOLIC (Some Vatican Resources)

Ten Commandments for the Environment
<http://www.catholic.net/index.php?id=499&option=dedestaca>

THE ANGLICAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA

Canon No. 11, 2007, Protection of the Environment:
<http://www.anglican.org.au/docs/GS07Canon%2011Protection%20of%20Environment.pdf>

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

A New Earth: The environmental challenge (2002)
http://www.catholic.org.au/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&Itemid=158&gid=499

THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

Living Sustainably:
<http://www.unitingjustice.org.au/issues/living-sustainably.html>

Resources and Papers:
<http://www.unitingjustice.org.au/issues/living-sustainably/living-sustainably-resources-papers.html>

Green Church:
<http://victas.uca.org.au/green-church>

AUSTRALIAN RELIGIOUS RESPONSE TO CLIMATE CHANGE:
<http://www.arrcc.org.au/>