This article originally appeared in Search, *a Church Of Ireland theological journal*

An Introduction to Eco- theology

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Modern concern for the environment dates back some 50 years, although strands can of course be detected much earlier. The development and intensification of this concern has been accelerated with the realisation that unprecedented climate change, caused by human modification of the atmosphere, now presents the major medium-term challenge to the future well-being of much of humanity. It is beyond the scope of this article to analyse this discussion, which has been well aired elsewhere. Suffice it to reiterate that, the belief that the world climate is changing rapidly, and that human activities are the primary driver of this, is held by the overwhelming majority of climate scientists, for whom the "debate" was concluded many years ago. Added to this are other major concerns: over consumption of finite resources, pollution, loss of biodiversity and habitat destruction.

Christian environmentalism has been a somewhat late arrival at the table. In the last couple of decades, the subject has proliferated into many different strands, but uniting each of these has been a desire to move from theology to praxis: that reflection should show its fruit in action, both locally and globally. The contribution of Christian theology to the environmental movement has been to argue that the problems are not simply scientific. Given the consensus from ecologists on many issues, why do human beings not change their behaviour? Why do governments not act more decisively? The issue lies deeper within human beings: the seductive nature of the myth of progress, and the reluctance of us all to examine our own behaviour. The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew 1, states: "We often refer to an environmental crisis, but the real crisis lies not in the environment, but in the human heart. The fundamental problem is to be found not outside but inside ourselves, not in the ecosystem, but in the way we think".[1]

Biblical eco- theology

In a provocative article written in the journal *Science* as far back as 1967, Lynn White blamed the Judeo-Christian tradition for many of the ecological problems of the planet. He pointed out that Genesis 1:28 had been crucial for the Christian understanding of the creation; the concept of dominion being granted to human beings had led to a dualistic theology of Man over against the natural world, which was reflected in the way natural theology had endorsed the rise of technology to tame and subdue the planet.[2]

White made his point; but subsequent biblical scholarship by, among others, R J Berry, Calvin B. de Witt and Margaret Barker has sought to recover more ecologically affirming attitudes within scripture itself. Foremost among these attitudes has been the idea of stewardship: that humans have been given responsibility by God to care for the earth: "We must keep the creation as God keeps us"[3]. This will include the command to participate in Christ's reconciliation of all things (Col 1:19-20), to ensure that the land, as much as humanity, has its Sabbath (Exodus 23: 10-12) and that we may enjoy, but not destroy, God's good creation (e.g. Deut 20:19, 22:6).

However, there are limitations to the principle of stewardship. Human beings simply do not have the knowledge or experience to be stewards of anything on the scale of the Earth. Clare Palmer writes: "To be a successful steward…it is necessary to understand that which is being controlled. But the natural world is not like an estate, nor like money in this respect. It is composed of complex ecosystems that we do not understand and cannot predict"[4]

James Lovelock describes the stewardship concept as "sheer hubris…. We are no more qualified to be stewards or developers of the Earth than are goats to be gardeners."[5] Furthermore, what does stewardship mean in practical terms? Are we supposed to tidy up and "improve" nature, or do we stand back and let nature be itself? Finally, it presupposes a vertical, hierarchical relationship in which God is in charge of humans, who in turn are in charge of the rest of creation.

Richard Bauckham[6] encourages us to look again at the accounts in Genesis: human beings are first and foremost part of Creation. The human being (*'adam*) is formed from the dust of the soil (*'adamah*) and the call to exercise dominion (*radah*) is within strictly controlled limits, since the living creatures have their prior call to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth". So humans are not so much stewards, as part of, and interdependent with, the rest of creation - a point emphasised in the Noaic covenant which is made not just with humans, but with animals too (Gen 9:9-10). The dominion we are granted does not set us above creation, but rather gives us a specific role within it.

Barker[7] brings out the same point in looking at the Wisdom literature and the Psalms, where creation itself praises God (Psalm 148, Isa 42: 10), and in the prophetic tradition, where human sinfulness leads to the destruction of the environment. Hosea 4: 1-3 is an example:

> "Swearing, lying, and murder,
> And stealing and adultery break out;
> Bloodshed follows bloodshed.
> Therefore the land mourns,
> And all who live in it languish;
> Together with the wild animals
> And the birds of the air,
> Even the fish of the sea are perishing."

Note the kind of "un-creation" as the creatures are listed in reverse order from that in Genesis 1, and the concept that, although humans are an influence on the created order, they are also dependent on it. This idea may be at the back of Paul's thinking in the passage of Romans 8:19-23, "the creation has been subjected to futility"; human sin and excess has brought about inevitable damage to the earth. So a rounded biblical eco-theology will consider not just stewardship, but that the created world has "supreme worth for God, and that violation of the earth amounts to an affront to God's holiness". [8]

Orthodox theology

It is worth noting briefly that theologians from the Eastern Orthodox traditions offer some interesting insights and a different way of looking at human beings and their relationship to creation. The liturgical celebration at the heart of Orthodox theology is

permeated by references to the natural world, in contrast to Western liturgies, which focus largely on human salvation history:

> Every creature made by thee offers thee thanks. The angels offer thee a hymn; the heavens a star; the Magi, gifts; the shepherds, their wonder; the earth, its cave; the wilderness, the manger…[9]

At times the non-human creation actually takes the lead in praising God.

Some writers such as John Zizioulas write about humanity as priest of creation[10], making the natural world sacred by offering it to God in the Eucharist; but he leaves himself open to the charge of anthropocentric hubris mentioned above. Other writers see the Liturgy as giving humans a voice alongside the pre existing praise of creation.

Liberation and eco-feminist theologies

Sean McDonagh[11] and Leonardo Boff[12] have linked concern for the environment with liberation for the poorest of the world. McDonagh, from his experience of working for many years in the Philippines, demonstrates how the demands of capitalism and modern technology have led to the despoliation of the land of native farmers in that country. There is thus a double oppression, of both the people and the land, which can only be undone by a radical deconstruction of modern Western post- colonialism and the damage that it causes to the environment.

The theologies which have emerged from indigenous cultures such as those in South America, and among the aboriginal peoples of Australia, also emphasised the relationship of these cultures to the land, and its sacredness for them, emphasising the local rather than the global. There is perhaps a similarity with our own Celtic Christian traditions, however much these have become a catch-all for any post-modern interpretations. It must be asked however, how far these idealised views of indigenous cultures and past farming practices are relevant in the modern world. Satirist P J O'Rourke pithily answers those who would seek to return to the past with one word: "Dentistry".

Eco-feminist theology is a complex meeting of many strands of thinking, but most share a belief that women, no less than nature, have been devalued by a patriarchal, dualist way of thinking which is about the control and domination of both. Sallie McFague develops the metaphor of the earth as "God's Body", so that all creation is "God's self-expression", and salvation is extended to all bodies on the earth (not just human ones) and is first and foremost about living better on the earth[13].

In her later work McFague is more concerned with economic oppression, consumerism and a re-evaluation of traditional Christology and theologies of atonement.[14] Anna Primavesi, by contrast, incorporates the Gaia model of James Lovelock[15], while others have recovered the biblical strand of Woman Wisdom or Sophia as incorporating a feminine dimension to the work of God in creation.

***Laudato Si* & Eco-praxis**

What does this theology mean in practice? How does it relate to the Churches in Ireland today, and what are the implications for our mission?

The publication of *Laudato Si* was of course a ground breaking moment: here was the full weight of papal authority calling on Catholics to accept and support the science behind climate change, and to redouble their efforts to care for the Earth. It was warmly welcomed by the Churches of both the Reformed and Orthodox traditions.

Eco Congregation has been working since 2005 to help congregations put theology into practice. The Church of Ireland Diocese of Cashel, Ferns and Ossory has also been proactive, since the passing of its Green Charter in 2008, organising seminars on sustainable energy and water conservation and running an annual competition to reward parishes that have achieved some progress in the ecological sphere.

When Churches do address environmental concerns, the obstacles that are encountered fall into four categories:

a) *"This has nothing to with the Church which is to be concerned with human salvation."* This is where education about eco-theology is required, with a holistic reading of Scripture as outlined above.

b) *"What can we do? Individuals and churches are far too insignificant to have any influence"*. It is certainly true that our contribution to greenhouse gas emissions and other pollutants is miniscule compared with that of industry and the effects of government policy. To this can be replied that the fact that one can do little is no excuse for doing nothing. Our Christian faith requires us to bring about change and influence in the world us, and to live our lives as God calls us. Furthermore, almost all movements of change have begun within small groups of individuals who have worked to bring about change in their local area, which in turn influences national and international policy. The fact that a parish or a church is seen to take these issues seriously raises awareness in those both inside and outside the life of the local church.

c) *Hostility from the rural community*. It is unfortunate that hostility between certain sections of the environmental movement and the farming community has been all too common. However, my experience in a rural parish has led me to notice the beginning of a change: where environmental good practice can be encouraged as way of reducing expensive inputs, and backed up with grant aid for capital projects such as insulation and efficient machinery, much can be achieved.

d) *Apathy and indifference.* Environmental issues are seen as long-term problems about which little can be done; they fade into insignificance beside the day-to-day need to earn a living. This too requires the long-term raising of awareness, and the addressing of practical, local issues.

If a parish or congregation decides to address the environmental issues, where do the members begin? The ***Charter of Cashel, Ferns and Ossory*** is worth reprinting as a guide:

As Christians and members of the Anglican Communion, we have an obligation to protect God's creation, not only nationally but globally. The Diocese of

Cashel, Ferns & Ossory affirms its commitment to Environmental Awareness and Protection by:

Identifying areas of waste and excess.

Encouraging environmental consciousness in every parish.

Promoting environmental responsibility in the broader community.

Spiritually and financially supporting third world development, supporting fair trade and addressing the effects of climate change.

Advocating policy change at local and national level that is environmentally beneficial.

Identifying Waste and Excess

Turn off unnecessary lighting.

Use heating only when essential.

Draught proof windows and doors.

Provide Recycling facilities in all churches.

Identify and deal with inefficient equipment

Encourage environmental consciousness

Infuse the Churches worship with references to God's creation.

Avail of alternative energies or fuel efficient systems.

Impress upon Select Vestries the environmental consequences of their decisions.

Include environmental issues in the Churches education programmes at every level.

Maintain Church environs sympathetically and cherish trees and wildlife.

Promote Environmental responsibility

Lead by courageous and articulate example

Cooperate with other people of faith who share these aims.

Educate members of the public to the moral and economic consequences of inaction.

Dialogue creatively on these issues with members of the agricultural community.

Encourage cleaner and more environmentally responsible urban living.

Support Third World Development

Raise awareness of the effect of climate change on the developing world.

Support projects that assist those who suffer most from Climate Change.

Campaign alongside Bishops' Appeal and similar agencies who work for change.

Think seriously about how our lifestyle and carbon footprint affect the poor.

Break the bread in solidarity with those whose future is crushed by our lifestyles.

Policy Change in Church and State

Use the Churches, councils and synods as places of environmental debate and agents of change.

Raise expectations concerning environmental protection facilities provided by Local Authorities.

Demonstrate to public representatives that their environmental policies matter by how we vote, lobby and act.

Draw inspiration from the achievements and experiences of other nations and churches within the European family and seek to contribute ourselves.

Offer informed and understanding prayers for those who carry great responsibilities in these matters.[16]

The website of Eco-Congregation Ireland provides an extensive list of small practical ways in which a parish can begin to implement some changes to their own practice and influence the wider community[17]. Two other publications which should be of considerable assistance from the Church of England are "*How many light bulbs does it take to change a Christian?"* and *Don't Stop at the Lights"*[18] Furthermore, environmental awareness needs to be part of the training of both clergy and lay ministers.

Conclusion

The time for action has come, and indeed is arguably long past. The Churches in Ireland, so long silent about the environment, needs to find their voices, both for their own credibility but also because of the biblical imperative to care for God's creation. It is surprising how often the secular world looks to us for leadership: in 2007 the UK's Environment Agency asked environmentalists for "50 ideas that really could save the planet": in first place came "Use less electricity", but at number two was the statement "Religious leaders need to make the planet their priority".[19]

Notes

1 HAH Bartholomew 1, "Sacrifice: the Missing Dimension", in *The Adriatic Sea. A Sea at Risk, A Unity of Purpose* (Athens: Religion, Science and The Environment 2003)

2 Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis" *Science* 155.3767 (1967)

3 Larry Rasmussen, "Symbols to Live By" in Berry, R.J. ed. *Environmental Stewardship* (London/New York T&T Clark International, 2006) pp174-184

4 Clare Palmer, "Stewardship: A Case Study in Environmental ethics" ibid. p72

5 James Lovelock, "The Fallible Concept of Stewardship of the Earth" ibid. p108

6 Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology* (London, DLT 2010) pp16-35

7 Margaret Barker, *Creation: A Biblical Vision for the Environment* (London/New York T&T Clark International, 2010)

8 Celia Deane-Drummond, *Eco Theology* (London, DLT 2008) p89

9 Nativity Vespers, from *The Festal Menaion*, trans. Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware (London, Faber & Faber, 1969)

10 John Zizoulas "Man the Priest of Creation" in A. Walker and C. Carras (eds.) *Living Orthodoxy in the Modern World* (London, SPCK, 1996) p 178-88

11 eg. S. McDonagh, *The Greening of the Church* (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1990)

12 Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth: Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1997)

13 Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (London, SCM Press, 1993)

14 eg. Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2001)

15 Anne Primavesi, *Sacred Gaia: Holistic Theology and Earth System Science* (London, Routledge, 2000)

16 Available on the Diocesan Website:

17 www. ecocongregationireland.com

18 Clare Foster & David Shreeve (London, Church House Publishing,2007 & 2008)

19 Quoted in Foster and Shreeve, *Don't Stop at the Lights* p4