

The Environment

Worldwide public awareness now exists that the environment is being devastated by pollution, deforestation, desertification, ozone depletion and global warming. It is also clear that the consequences of these ecological changes fall disproportionately upon the poor of the world. Yet despite this awareness, the social and political resolve to create a more ecologically sustainable way of life has not materialised.

“Today’s environmental problems are a by-product of an integrated economic system in which millions of people and commercial entities are involved. The sheer complexity of the system and the attendant ethical issues can be immobilising and conventional wisdom often describes the globalising economy in a way that excludes the applicability of human values. Social trends such as the destruction of communities and ways of life are assimilated as inevitable consequences of economic laws that only a sentimentalist would dare to question. Christians in common with other people concerned with environmental issues face the intellectual challenge of developing a holistic view of nature, humanity and God, in which economic processes have their part, but in which limits are recognised. These limits flow from a reverence for human life and the integrity of the whole creation.

“In these circumstances some environmentalists have come to believe that the necessary changes will only be brought about by a profound shift of consciousness rooted in some kind of religious or spiritual renewal:

I think of religion, or more specifically the church ... engaging in discourse about their responsibilities to care for creation within the context of their traditions of faith, as being more important in the effort to conserve life on earth than all the politicians and experts put together. The church may be in fact our last chance. (Max Oelshlaeger, *Caring for Creation*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1994).

Environment is the stuff of religion, and religion is the stuff of the environment. Yet we are schizophrenic about them. (Address by Sir Crispin Tickell, Lambeth Conference, Religion and the Environment, University of Kent at Canterbury, 29 July, 1998).

“Given that there are such expectations outside the Church, it is not surprising that some environmentalists express their frustration at the apparent complacency and lack of vision regarding ecological issues within the Church:

I can’t help but be astonished at the sheer lack of urgency among Church leaders today; ours is a world crying out for leadership, for some kind of spiritual guidance. And yet as the winds of change whistle up their richly caparisoned copes, where on earth are they?... It seems to me so obvious that without some groundswell of spiritual concern, the transition to a more sustainable way of life remains utterly improbable. (Jonathon Porritt, *Seeing Green*, London, Blackwell, 1984.

“Solemn declarations have been made in the past. Lambeth X in 1968 inveighed against pollution. Lambeth XI in 1978 addressed an appeal to leaders and governments of the world on environmental issues conscious “that time is running short”. Lambeth XII in 1988 also passed a resolution on the environment in which the Bishops called upon each province and diocese “as a matter of urgency” to inform the faithful about “what is happening to our environment and to encourage them to see stewardship of God’s earth for the care of our neighbours as a necessary part of Christian discipleship.”

“Lambeth XIII must translate these aspirations into action.

“The Archbishop of Canterbury has stated that ecological challenges are “unlikely to be met satisfactorily without the moral and spiritual motivation nurtured by the churches.” But he has also acknowledged that, with a few exceptions, “our contributions to public debate about environmental responsibility have often been patchy and undistinguished.”

“An eco-theology for Lambeth XIII

“Plainly a great challenge and opportunity lies before the Church. Yet if that challenge is to be met, a widespread spiritual renewal and conversion must be experienced within the Church. There is also an urgent need for the Church to reflect on Scripture and Christian tradition in the light of the ecological crisis, and consequently to bring their faith into an effective engagement with the pursuit of a more sustainable way of life.

“The gravity of the present challenge to the global ecosystem arises from the technologically enhanced impact of human intervention on our planet. Scripture was inspired in a different world but biblical insights into the nature of the God-human-world relation provide a firm foundation for a contemporary ecological theology.

“The Creation Covenant

“The foundations of an ecological theology can be found in the ancient biblical notion of the creation covenant. Whilst only implicit in the accounts of creation found in the Book of Genesis, the creation covenant is made explicit after the flood. The relevant texts are to be found in Genesis 9 and also in Isaiah 11, 24, 32, 55 and Hosea 2. In these passages God is pictured binding together all living beings, and the earth itself, into a web of inter-relatedness. The effects of this covenant are empirically verifiable in the interdependence of the natural order. Thus creation was established in a divinely intended state of “shalom”, usually translated “peace”, but also incorporating ideas of harmony, justice and integrity.

“Furthermore, whilst the creation covenant is founded upon God’s “rainbow” promises, like all covenants in scripture, it also assumes human moral responsibilities, including ecological responsibilities. While the covenant in no way legitimises a crass anthropocentrism, human beings are given a special place in mediating the divine promise and intention to other human beings, to future generations, to other living

creatures and to the earth as a whole. Contempt for creation is therefore sin, a betrayal of the covenant and the trust reposed in human beings to “till” the earth but also to “keep” it (Gen. 11.15). It is in this context that human dominion, “radah” is to be exercised (Gen. 1.26).

“In Jesus Christ the Creation Covenant is renewed. “When anyone is in Christ there is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5.17). The redemptive purpose of God for a created order that has fallen into bondage and decay becomes a reality. The Logos theology of St John in the first chapter of his gospel is well known but its application to the created order is sometimes neglected. All things were made through Him and all things find their fulfilment in Him. The Logos became flesh, dwelt among us and in his life, death and resurrection reveals that to be fully human is to be in communion with God and the created order.

“The Sacrament of Creation

“Ecological theology is also founded on the belief that a deep communion exists between God and creation; indeed that creation is actually imbued with the divine presence, not in a pantheistic sense which confuses God with creation, but in a sacramental sense which maintains and affirms ontological distinctions between the natural and the divine.

“Christian doctrine preserves the necessary tension between divine immanence (god present within creation) and divine transcendence (God above and beyond creation) by speaking of God as Trinity. According to St Basil and the Nicene Creed each person of the Trinity relates to creation in a different way. The Father as the original cause is the “Creator of all things”. The Son as the creative cause is the One “through whom all things were made”. The Spirit as implementing cause is the “Creator of life”. In the person of the Father, God remains utterly distinct and separated from creation. In the Son, God is present within the divine order of creation as the Creator-Logos, the all-sufficient form and principle of the created order. In the person of the Holy Spirit, God is continually sustaining the whole creation with divine energy and potentiality. The Spirit is the One who precipitates the community of all created things. Creation, then, is not something upon which God simply acts from the outside but is also a vehicle of God’s self expression in which God speaks from within. God is creation’s true inwardness as well as its maker.

“Sacramental theology does not divinise nature but affirms the Trinitarian presence of God within creation and points to the natural world and matter itself as an effective medium of divine revelation, a means of communion with God. Nature is “sacred by association” (James Nash, *Loving nature: ecological integrity and Christian responsibility*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991).

“Priests for Creation

“Far from granting a mandate for human beings to do as they please with the earth, the divine bidding that they should have dominion over creation actually implies a solemn

responsibility on the part of humans to treat the earth with reverence and respect. As the divine image-bearers, humans are uniquely called to embody and express God's will and purpose for all creation which clearly excludes its abuse and wanton destruction.

“First and foremost human beings should be understood as biologically and ontologically part of nature and as co-partners with every other creature on earth. This is implied in the symbolism of Genesis 2 where God forms “adam”, the first earth creature out of the very dust (“ha-adam”). In an evolutionary perspective we have come to see human beings as the embodiment of a line of development which incorporates a number of simpler forms of life and this finds its theological expression in the teaching of St Maximus the Confessor that the human being is the microcosm of creation, the hypostasis of the whole creation community.

“God also ordained, however, that human beings should be co-creators. Whereas other creatures adjust to the given world, the human being desires to create its own world, transforming raw materials into new realities. Nevertheless this “subduing” of the natural world for human purpose and creativity was never intended to be to creation's detriment but rather the way in which it was to find its fulfilment. Human beings are called to be priests and pastors of creation, living bridges between heaven and earth. They are to pronounce God's blessing on creation and they are also the means of expressing creation's praise and longing to God.

“Nowhere is the priestly ministry of humanity brought more clearly into focus than in the Eucharistic feast, which is indeed “the Eucharist for all things” (Apostolic Constitutions in Louis Bouyer's *Eucharist*, Notre Dame 1968, quoted in Andrew Linzey and Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *After Noah*, (London, Mowbray, 1997). The Eucharist embodies the conviction, not only that elements of earthly reality – bread and wine – can become means of grace for human beings, but that also, as they are offered up to God by human beings, the elements themselves receive new meaning and status. The offertory prayer declares:

Blessed be God through whom we have this bread to offer which earth has given and human hands have made. It will become for us the bread of life.

“The prayer is a subtle balance between recognising God's gift while acknowledging our human role in developing and using it rightly, and accepting its potential as a communication of God's own reality (see John Habgood's essay, ‘A sacramental approach’ in Charles Birch (ed) *Liberating life: contemporary approaches to ecological theology*, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1990). The priestly offering of bread and wine in the Eucharist, then, is itself a microcosm of the wider priestly ministry which human beings exercise in relation to creation as a whole. Human beings may legitimately transform nature, but only in the context of recognising the natural world as a gift from God, blessed with the capacity to be a sign and means of the divine presence and therefore to be treated with reverence and respect.

“Human beings must neither disappear into the community of creation, nor must they be detached from that community. They are called at once to be imago mundi and imago Dei, and to stand before God on behalf of creation and before creation on behalf of God. Though they may enhance creation by skill and technology, this is only in order to offer it once again to the Creator. As servant-priests, they must be willing to make personal and corporate sacrifices for the common good of creation.

“The model for this sacrificial service is provided by the “kenosis” of Jesus Christ who emptied himself of “dominion” and sacrificed himself for the world. No ecological theology is complete if social justice is not a part of it. “Jesus self-emptied his power and dominion for the sake of both human and non-human creation.” (George Mathew at Lambeth XIII).

“Sabbath Feast of ‘enoughness’

“The whole idea of the Sabbath is rich with ecological significance, not least because it points away from anthropocentric interpretations of creation. This is achieved in two ways. Firstly, the Genesis narrative emphasises that creation reaches its crown and consummation not in the creation of humankind on the sixth day, but in the peace of the Sabbath on the seventh day. Secondly the Sabbath concept when related to the fallow season for the earth introduces a constraint on human intervention in nature and thus sets limits to the human exploitation of the natural order.

“Rather than being simply a pause between bouts of activity, the Sabbath was to be an occasion for celebration and thanksgiving, a feast of contentment and ‘enoughness’. The rhythm of Sabbath days and Sabbath years reclaims time from a mere succession of passing moments and gives life a shape which flows from the recognition that creation was brought into being not to serve any transient human purpose but to be material for the praise and glory of the Creator.

“Yet today, creation “wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell”, it is “seared with trade and smeared with toil” (Gerard Manly Hopkins, *God’s Grandeur*) knowing no respite from the demands of human beings addicted to a cult of ‘more’. The Sabbath then must be reinvigorated, not as nostalgic symbol of a religious past, but as a feast of redemption and an anticipation of the ecological harmony and sustainable equilibrium of Christ’s Kingdom.”

Resolution 1.8

This Conference:

- a) Reaffirms the Biblical vision of Creation according to which:

Creation is a web of inter-dependent relationships bound together in the Covenant which God, the Holy Trinity, has established with the whole earth and every living being.

- i) the divine Spirit is sacramentally present in Creation, which is therefore to be treated with reverence, respect and gratitude;
 - ii) human beings are both co-partners with the rest of Creation and living bridges between heaven and earth, with responsibility to make personal and corporate sacrifices for the common good of all Creation;
 - iii) the redemptive purposes of God in Jesus Christ extends to the whole of Creation.
- b) Recognises:
- i) that unless human beings take responsibility for caring for the earth, the consequences will be catastrophic because of:
 - ◆ climate change
 - ◆ overpopulation
 - ◆ unsustainable levels of consumption by the rich
 - ◆ poor quality and shortage of water
 - ◆ air pollution
 - ◆ eroded and impoverished soil
 - ◆ forest destruction
 - ◆ plant and animal extinction;
 - ii) that the loss of natural habitats is a direct cause of genocide amongst millions of indigenous peoples and is causing the extinction of thousands of plant and animal species. Unbridled capitalism, selfishness and greed cannot continue to be allowed to pollute, exploit and destroy what remains of the earth's indigenous habitats;
 - iii) that the future of human beings and all life on earth hangs in balance as a consequence of the present unjust economic structures, the injustice existing between the rich and the poor, the continuing exploitation of the natural environment and the threat of nuclear self-destruction;
 - iv) that the servanthood to God's creation is becoming the most important responsibility facing humankind and that we should work together with people of all faiths in the implementation of our responsibilities;
 - v) that we as Christians have a God given mandate to care for, look after and protect God's creation.
- c) Pray in the Spirit of Jesus Christ:
- i) for widespread conversion and spiritual renewal in order that human beings will be restored to a relationship of harmony with the rest of Creation and that this relationship may be informed by the principles of

- justice and the integrity of every living being, so that self-centred greed is overcome; and
- ii) for the recovery of the Sabbath principle, as part of the redemption of time and the restoration of the divinely intended rhythms of life.

Resolution 1.9

This Conference:

- a) Calls upon all ecumenical partners and other faith communities, governments and transnational companies:
 - i) to work for sustainable society in a sustainable world;
 - ii) to recognise the dignity and rights of all people and the sanctity of all life, especially the rights of future generations;
 - iii) to ensure the responsible use and re-cycling of natural resources;
 - iv) to bring about economic reforms which will establish a just and fair trading system both for people and for the environment.
- b) Calls upon the United Nations to incorporate the right of future generations to a sustainable future in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- c) Asks the Joint Standing Committee of the Anglican Consultative Council and the Primates to consider the appointment of a co-ordinator of an inter-national ecological network within the Anglican Communion, who would:
 - i) work in co-operation with other ecumenical and interfaith agencies;
 - ii) be funded through and responsible to the Anglican Consultative Council;
 - iii) support those engaged in grass-roots environmental issues so that the Church can play a role in lobbying for ecological justice in both the public and the private sectors; and
 - iv) contribute to the development of environmental educational programmes for use in the training of Christian leaders.