

Ecotheology and Climate Change

How does theology inform us on climate change? How we answer this question depends on our faith and worldview on how we imagine God, how we relate to God's creation, and how we see God at work in the world. For instance:

- Is the gospel (and thus our mission) primarily about humanity's salvation?
- If so, is the fate of the world, eg. climate change, of secondary importance to our mission as we look forward to 'a new heaven and a new earth'?
- Is climate change of little theological interest, then, other than perhaps being a sign of 'end times'?
- Or are the catastrophic consequences of climate change a judgement from God about humanity's sinful degeneracy, and thus a moral problem?
- Or Is climate change just a consequence of humanity's undue exploitation of natural resources, a justice problem?
- Or is theology irrelevant as climate change is none of these, but just a result of geological change, a scientific problem?

These are questions with which theologians have wrestled for over 50 years, stimulated by an article in *Science* in 1967 suggesting that the ecological crisis was a significant theological issue as it could be attributed to a Christian dogma of *man's transcendence of, and rightful mastery over, nature*.

This generated huge academic and theological debate that continues to this day. It has led to some fundamental theological reflection with regard to how we relate to the world around us, typified by the title of Sallie McFague's 2001 book *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*.

At the heart of my reflection is a re-imagining of our relationship with the world around us, that now locates the ecological debate within a theological context. A few examples:

David Tacey, in *Re-enchantment: the new Australian spirituality*, 162, 2000: *The environmental crisis is not just a moral problem or an economic issue relating to how we manage our natural resources: fundamentally it is a spiritual problem about how we experience ourselves in the world.*

Jürgen Moltmann, in *Ethics of Hope*, 67, 2012: *The dying of the forests finds its correspondence in the spread of mental and spiritual neuroses, the pollution of the seas and rivers is paralleled by the nihilist feeling about life which is prevalent among many people who live in the mega cities. The crisis we are experiencing is not just an ecological crisis.*

Les Sponsel, in *Spiritual Ecology; A Quiet Revolution*, 2012: *the eco-crisis will only be resolved, or at least markedly reduced, if there is a very fundamental rethinking, refeeling, and revisioning of the place of humans in nature.*

Laudato Si', the 2015 Papal Encyclical on the environment describes the Earth as *among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor* and refers to the *fundamental rights of the poor and underprivileged*.

As outlined in the Consultation Paper, at the centre of theological inquiry are two biblical creation stories: Genesis 1:26 where humankind is made in the image of God and given dominion over creation, and Genesis 2:15 where humanity is formed from the dust of the ground and put in the Garden of Eden to till, serve and minister to it. What contrasting images: humankind created in God's image, with dominion over the Earth; or humankind made from Earth's dust and tasked to serve the Earth! *Adamah* means Earth.

The first lends itself to anthropocentric and utilitarian views of creation that Earth is God's gift to humanity, to serve humanity's needs such as recreation, mining, farming, housing, transport, and spiritual retreat. The second suggests concepts of interconnectedness, stewardship and humanity serving Earth, and recognises Earth's intrinsic value. Do we serve the Earth, or the Earth serve us, or both? How we interpret Genesis profoundly shapes our worldview.

For example, is Earth merely the stage on which God's economy of salvation for humanity is played out? In this scenario Earth and its resources are seen in utilitarian terms, to be sustained so human life can continue; Earth is valued as a gift from God, over which humanity has total dominion. It is Terra Nullius, and eco-mission is effectively a non-starter. Human needs have priority.

Or, we could regard Creation as incomplete, anticipating a new Heaven and Earth. In this scenario Earth has about the same status as slaves 200 years ago – it is a part of an economic machine, to be looked after and kept healthy ... so it can provide for human needs. Finding the right balance between human economic activity and environmental protection becomes our eco-mission, with sustainable stewardship the catch-cry of this anthropocentric activity.

Alternatively, we could regard Earth as our neighbour, our Beloved Companion on life's journey. In this scenario we are motivated by joy and celebration in our relationship with Earth, which has its own intrinsic value and rights as a co-creature with whom God has a loving relationship, independent of humanity. Eco-mission is then about serving, and ministering to, the world around us.

So, in considering a response to climate change, how do we relate to the Earth?

- As our slave: if we look after it and engage in environmentally sustainable practices, will it, like the Magic Pudding, continue to serve us without limit?
- As an object to be traded in our market economy?
- As a free gift of God, for which we have no accountability back to God?
- As our neighbour, a member of God's household?
- Do we hear the Voice of the Earth echoing the cry of Jesus on the cross: *my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*
- Do we give the Earth anything back, in exchange for what we take from it?
- If so should a river (created by God) have legal rights, just as a company (created by humanity) has legal rights? The Whanganui River in New Zealand, for example, has some legal status, as does the Yarra.
- And is scarcity (of water, resources, food, land) an indictment on how poorly we are serving the Earth? Would it abundantly meet all our needs if we were in a healthy Creation-centric, not anthropocentric, relationship with it?

In conclusion, recent theological inquiry has set science, economic and justice considerations in the climate change debate within a relational spiritual context:

- VICTAS Synod's Vision and Mission Principles include *seeking community, compassion and justice for all creation*;
- in 1991 the UCA Assembly passed a resolution that appealed to individual nations to incorporate the Rights of Nature and the Rights of Future Generations into their constitutions and legislation;
- in 2018 the UCA Assembly reflected on Proposal 19 to recognise the imperative for the Uniting Church to embody its prophetic role in the public sphere, acknowledging our relationship and responsibility within and with God's good creation;
- In 2019 UCA President, Dr Deirdre Palmer, was the first on a list of 153 faith leaders who signed a letter to the Prime Minister, *No Faith in Coal*, organised by the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change.
- one of the Anglican church's five marks of mission is *to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth*;
- the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches have branded environmental exploitation as a sin.

The underlying theology behind recent input by churches to the climate change debate is perhaps best summarised by a strong prophetic statement by the General Synod of the Church of England in February this year when inviting its churches to adopt a target of net zero carbon emissions by 2030 (not 2050!):

The global climate emergency is a crisis for God's creation, and a fundamental injustice.

Are we, then, as individuals and churches, prepared to take a similar prophetic theological position and commit ourselves to a net zero target if we propose that Synod calls on the Government to commit to a net zero target?

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***Precautionary Principle
Tragedy of the Commons***

<i>Creation metaphor</i>	<i>Stage</i>	<i>Incomplete</i>	<i>Beloved</i>
Attitude to Land	Utility	Object	Co-creature
Motivation for action	Sustainability	Protection	Joy
Emission goals	N/A	Renewal	Celebration
How Land is valued	Anthropocentric	Hierarchical	Intrinsic
How Land is regarded	Resource	Slave	Kin
Duty towards Land	Dominion	Stewardship	Service
Relationship with Land	Gift	Home	Companion
Moral standing of Land	Neutral	Good	Sacred
Legal treatment of Land	Terra Nullius	Ownership	Rights