

GOD IN CREATION – AN EVOLVING UNDERSTANDING

Christian understanding of God in Creation is often criticised for viewing nature as simply a backdrop to belief in salvation. Although there is some truth in the view that if people see themselves solely in relationship to God, they will tend not to see themselves in community with the rest of God's creation, it can also be argued that a spirituality unduly focused on the community of all creatures may also be a partial understanding. Both ways of understanding God's purposes in creation need to be grasped. Indeed the Christian tradition has always seen "salvation as the restoration and renewal, as well as the completion, of God's original good creation"¹. This section explores how a Christian understanding of God's purposes in creation has evolved over the centuries.

Ascetic and monastic traditions

In the Early Church the desert mothers and fathers sought the solitude of the wilderness in the deserts of Egypt, Syria and Palestine to better worship God in contemplation and prayer. Moving from the city to the desert was more than rejecting culture for nature, it also involved celebrating a very different nature to be found in the desert. As a monastic tradition developed within the Eastern Church the search for remote places of refuge and religious purity lingered with, for example, St Basil establishing a fourth century monastery in a wilderness deemed beautiful in the forested mountains south of the Black Sea². Eastern monasticism also developed a more nuanced attitude towards animals leading to idealized tales of the saints and their kindness to animals, for example St Jerome and the lion. By contrast in the West the wilderness was increasingly feared as a place of spiritual warfare and, as exemplified by the Cistercians, only of value in escaping from a corrupt society. It is noteworthy that both the Western and Eastern Churches' contrasting attitudes to wilderness can be traced back to Jesus' temptation where his confrontation with Satan was balanced by the ministry of wild animals (Mark: 1, 13).

The Celtic church has also been seen as having a particular awareness of God's presence in creation well-captured in the 'nature poems' written by hermit monks who withdrew from the main community to live in remote cells or islands. As noted later, this romanticized view of the

¹ Bauckham, R (2010) *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology*, Baylor University Press, p. 191.

² Nash, R F (2001) *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th edition, Yale University Press, p. 18.

Celtic church portrayed in the *Carmina Gadelica*³ with its evocation of monks living in harmony with nature has been rebutted in more recent readings of the original texts. For example, Bradley finds these poems to be “very much starker and darker in tone, more centred on the themes of sin and judgment and less affirmative of the natural world”⁴ with the ‘golden age’ of Celtic monasticism far more focused on missionary struggle than contemplation of nature.

Medieval period

By the late medieval period, an understanding of God in creation had become more subtle and nuanced reflecting contemporary developments in debates over humankind’s position in nature⁵. Was humankind intended to have domination over all creation or did every part of creation, human or non-human, have a part to play in praising the Creator? Probably the best medieval example of this latter vision is the life story of St Francis of Assisi. He was not an isolated example, but is seen as the ultimate expression of traditions that had been growing for centuries. In living in remote areas alongside wild animals, St Francis found a mutuality in which the original harmony of paradise was almost restored: his care for animals reciprocated in their care for him. This finds its finest expression in his famous *Canticle of the Creatures* which urges all of us to give praise to God for our fellow creatures. But, as with the Celtic saints, we must be wary of concentrating on this aspect of his ministry and romanticising his contribution to a contemporary ecology. Of course domination over creation was also part of the medieval world view. But this was undertaken by a feudal society in which many natural goods (land, woods and water) were managed collectively. Since the population was relatively stable, or occasionally devastated by plague, the natural realm in the medieval period was, for the most part, sustainably managed.

Renaissance, Reformation and the Enlightenment

As scientific enquiry became more systematised during the Renaissance and Enlightenment, medieval speculation gave way to a more rigorous investigation of **the** nature based on inductive theorising (Francis Bacon) and experimentation (Robert Hooke) leading to a more instrumentalist view. Calvin’s assertion that “the end for which all things were created (was) that none of the

³ Carmichael, A (1992) *Carmina Gadelica*, Floris Books.

⁴ Bradley, I (1999) *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams*, p. 159.

⁵ Glacken, C (1967) *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, University of California Press.

conveniences and necessities of life might be wanting to men”⁶ endorsed an emerging view within Protestant Europe that the wilderness should be ‘tamed’ and made more productive. When coupled with Bishop Lancelot Andrewes’ claim that God made man to labour and not to be idle, this readily became a focus for the emergent Protestant work ethic. A natural order untouched by human endeavour was a standing rebuke to human sin and idleness. Thus the early Puritan settlers in New England saw it as their Christian duty to make “this poore barren Wildernesse become a fruitful Land”⁷.

This increasing commodification of nature coincided with the rise of capitalism. Land held in common became enclosed, peasants disenfranchised and the emerging mercantile economy enshrined the right to private property. During the Enlightenment landowners well-versed in the latest advances in agronomy and engineering viewed the untilled heaths, mountains and fens as ‘a standing reproach’⁸. This ‘taming’ of wild nature to render it productive even extended to making it more ‘pleasing to the eye’ as evidenced by the numerous gardens designed by Capability Brown for the English landed gentry. Thus by the 1750s the urge to exercise dominion over nature had even locally been translated into remaking landscapes to make them appear ‘picturesque’.

The balance between the domination of nature and good stewardship for future generations was shifting profoundly towards the former. Feudal society, although ordered in a rigid hierarchy, managed large tracts of the rural landscape wisely often holding land, woods and water in common. By the 1800s this was being replaced by a market economy in which entrepreneurs used new technologies to extract additional value from the former common goods but now for individual benefit with little regard for environmental damage. A telling example of the transformation of wilderness can be found across the western United States where, within a century of European settlement from the 1850s onwards, a “landscape of abundance” had become a “landscape of scarcity”⁹. Today the results of this unbridled capitalism can be seen in rivers no longer reaching the sea, giant redwoods decimated by logging, soils mined of their long-

⁶ Calvin, J *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses, called Genesis.* 1, p. 98. translated J. King, London, 1847.

⁷ Edward Johnson, 1654 cited in Nash, R F (2001) *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th edition, Yale University Press, p. 37.

⁸ Thomas, K (1983) *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800*, Allen Lane.

⁹ Cronon W (1994) Landscapes of Abundance and Scarcity in *The Oxford History of the American West* ed. Milner C A *et al.*, Oxford University Press.

term fertility and whole species (most notably the Carrier Pigeon) rendered extinct. And for many Americans such a domination of nature by human agency is entirely consistent with Christian beliefs and practice.

Alternative views of humanity's role within creation

But alternative understandings of humanity's response to God's creation were emerging alongside this taming of the wilderness. Stimulated by an awareness of the sublimity of mountain scenery and sense of awe in wild places, the poets and painters of the Romantic movement captured a heightened sense of communion with nature in new ways. William Wordsworth epitomised this change in sensibility finding that humanity was united with the cosmos via a 'sense sublime' and a 'presence that disturbs'¹⁰ as he tramped the Lakeland fells. These twin themes of nature as guide and a moral force strongly influenced subsequent writers such as Henry Thoreau and the Scots-born John Muir who underwent similar epiphanies in the surroundings of Walden Pond in Massachusetts and the Yosemite Valley in California¹¹. For all three writers God became fused with his creation and the natural world a Sacred Other. Their writings, often couched in a pantheistic mysticism, provided a telling critique of a society in which individuals appeared as cogs in a machine inexorably driven by the demands of late 19th century capitalism. Their spirituality, however, sat ill-at-ease with orthodox Christianity's reluctance to critique a social order dependant on the labour of a rapidly expanding urban proletariat.

But such a critique was gaining momentum elsewhere as National Parks were set aside for "spiritual refreshment" – initially in the USA and subsequently across the world. In the 1940s Aldo Leopold's concept of the land ethic which "changes the role of *Homo Sapiens* from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it" inspired a new generation of green activists from the 1960s onwards. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) led to the outlawing of DDT, since when increasingly effective green NGOs have questioned the technological hubris and growth imperative of modern capitalism.

¹⁰ Northcott M S (1996) *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, p. 87.

¹¹ Nash, R F (2001) *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th edition, Yale University Press, chaps 3 and 8.

The emergence of eco-theology

Recent theological responses to these issues have taken many forms, partly triggered by Lynn White's attribution of the historical origins of the ecological crisis to Judeo-Christian teaching¹². While accepting that Christianity has promoted an instrumentalist view of nature, most theologians view this as a very partial reading of history. Many stress that as a religion of incarnation, Christianity is the most material of the world's great faiths with, at its heart, the material objects of water, bread and wine conveying divine grace and presence to believers¹³.

Rebuttals of White's thesis have taken contrasting forms¹⁴. Within the evangelical tradition, Francis Schaeffer¹⁵ noted that because of the Fall, the instruction to have dominion over nature has been exercised corruptly. However, as redeemed people, Christians are called to heal the world of sin by loving one another and caring for the non-human world. Accordingly, Christians are responsible for the well-being of all orders of creation both animate and inanimate. Theologians writing within the Orthodox tradition see humankind in a more priestly role offering the world to God in praise and worship. Here resolution of the ecological crisis requires a balancing of "mystery and mastery"¹⁶. In lifting up the fallen creation to God, the mystery of humanity's priestly role involves the mastery of humanizing the world of matter. In part this latter role involves a critique of acquisitiveness and the promotion of social justice – a call echoed by Alistair McIntosh¹⁷ in his challenge to western society's addiction to consumption.

Moving from theologies of creation which are focused on human responses to those which are more theo-centric, Moltman's *God in Creation*¹⁸ reasserts the immanence of God in inhabiting both matter and all living things. In devising a new doctrine of God, a new valuation of nature emerges with the Sabbath as creation's final purpose. This hallowing of the Sabbath and affirmation of Old Testament Jubilee commands allows human beings, livestock and the land itself to rest in anticipation of the completion of the new creation at the end of time.

¹² White, L (1967) The historical roots of our ecological crisis, *Science*, 155, 1203-7.

¹³ Polkinghorne, J (1996) *Beyond Science: the Wider Human Context*, Cambridge University Press, p. 114.

¹⁴ Northcott, M S (1996) *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, pp. 124 ff.

¹⁵ Schaeffer, F (1970) *Pollution and the Death of Man*, Crossway Books.

¹⁶ Northcott, M S (1996) *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, p. 133.

¹⁷ McIntosh, A (2008) *Hell and High Water: Climate Change, Hope and the Human Condition*, Birlinn Books.

¹⁸ Moltmann J (1985) *God in Creation: an Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, SCM Press.

A highly eco-centric view of God as Creator is found in Matthew Fox's promotion of 'creation spirituality'¹⁹ which represents an alternative to the 'fall-redemption' version of Christian spirituality attributed to St Augustine. In Fox's family tree of creation spirituality, medieval mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen, St Francis and Meister Eckhart are highly favoured for their privileging thanksgiving, praise and creativity over guilt, redemption and obedience²⁰. In Fox's formulation, Augustine's doctrine of original sin initiated Western Christendom's obsession with a fallen human and non-human nature, resulting in the rejection of the material world and promotion of asceticism. But many critics have challenged this dualism as a misreading of history and questioned the downplaying of the transcendence of God as Creator and significance of Christ's incarnation²¹.

A new monasticism

Moving from theological speculation to practice, it is striking that new monastic communities, strongly influenced by the Celtic and Benedictine traditions, have recently been founded in places of sacred historical significance such as Iona or close to Holy Island. The Iona Community consciously draws on the earlier Celtic tradition as evidenced in its worship book which speaks of being "inheritors of the Celtic tradition, with its deep sense of Jesus as the head of all, and of God's glory in all of creation"²². But given the Iona Community's emphasis on peace and justice and full-time staff based in Glasgow, the link with Celtic Christianity is much weaker than in the more recent Northumbria Community and the Community of Aidan and Hilda centred around Holy Island. Both Communities draw inspiration from the lives of the Northumbrian saints and, by researching the beliefs and practices of the Celtic church, seek to revitalise the present-day engagement of the church with society²³. God in Creation features strongly in worship in these communities but drawing on the romanticised Celtic spirituality of the late 19th *Carmina Gadelica* rather than the darker sin-centred prayers of Columba and his monks.

¹⁹ Fox, M (1991) *Creation Spirituality*, HarperSanFrancisco.

²⁰ Bauckham, R (2010) *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology*, Baylor University Press, p. 188-9.

²¹ *Ibid.* p.198.

²² Bradley, I (1999) *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams*, p. 210.

²³ *Ibid.* pp 208-9.

Others communities such as the Pilsdon Community in Dorset²⁴, or the Scargill Movement²⁵ in Yorkshire live prophetically by a rule and rhythm of life that aims to offer a message of hope and healing through contact with the land. Online communities such as EarthAbbey²⁶ with a particular focus on helping one another to live more in tune with the earth are re-inventing a more relational style of living emulating aspects of monasticism from previous centuries. As intentional communities following a rule that can often be difficult in a consumerist society, these communities require discipline and perseverance as adherents offer back to God what they have received through his grace.

Finally new 'desert solitaires' are emerging: one of the most striking being the modern-day mystic Annie Dillard. In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*²⁷ she explores the true nature of Nature – a harmonious functioning ecosystem or an impersonal unthinking force which overwhelms individuality. Much in the mould of Thoreau's *Walden*²⁸ and Leopold's *Sand County Almanac*²⁹, Dillard offers insights to further enrich a renewed Christian understanding of God in Creation.

²⁴ <http://www.pilsdon.org.uk/>

²⁵ <http://www.scargillmovement.org/>

²⁶ <http://www.earthabbey.com/>

²⁷ Dillard, A (1973) *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, HarperPerennial.

²⁸ Thoreau, H (1854) *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, Ticknor and Fields.

²⁹ Leopold, A, (1949) *A Sand County Almanac*, Oxford University Press.