

Idea for Action 3 *Theology and the environment*

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Authorship

The original version of this Idea for Action was written by David Pickering. This has been updated and redrafted by Alan Werritty and Richard Murray in 2012. New material on *God in Creation – an evolving understanding* was written by Alan Werritty.

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This Idea for Action aims to reflect some of the variety of theological ideas and perspectives that have been expressed, rather than provide a neat theological model of creation. It has also sought to ensure that, whilst attention has been paid to key texts in Genesis, it is consistent with images and stories from other parts of the Bible.

Quotes

'All creation is a song of praise to God' Hildegard of Bingen

'There will be no new Noah's Ark to save some and leave the rest to perish. We all either sink or swim together...' Leonardo Boff

See also **Idea for Action 6 "Resources for small groups"** which contains an address and sets of Bible Studies on the theme of caring for God's creation.

Caring for creation – a key Christian task (an extended version of this section can be found on pp. 16-20)

Christian concern for the environment has become increasingly important in recent years. In part this is a response to the realisation of the detrimental impact that human activity is having on the environment, in part, because of the growing interest in green or eco-theology.

Both the Bible and Christian tradition have some vital and profound insights into care of what the world terms the 'environment' but which the Church understands as God's creation. Approaching environmental issues through Christian 'lenses' offers valuable ethical and spiritual dimensions that may contribute to environmental work both within and outside the church. It is also an approach filled with hope. So often, environmental issues are dealt with against a background of fear and threat. We should stop doing activity 'x' because otherwise environmental problem 'y' will happen. Without minimising the gravity, scale or urgency of environmental issues, the starting point for caring for the Earth for Christians is as a proper response to a loving, creating God. Caring for creation is a key Christian task.

Exploring 'green Christianity' can be a positive, enjoyable and fulfilling part of Christian discipleship. As with all theology, Christian care for the environment needs to be rooted in a consideration of the Biblical heritage. This Idea for Action introduces some of the ideas in the developing area of eco-theology. The ideas are intended to form a foundation on which local churches can base their work to care for God's creation. This Idea for Action begins by exploring contrasting ways in which Christians have expressed their understanding of God in Creation through the ages.

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God in Creation – an evolving understanding

God's purposes in creation have not always been clearly understood by Christians. Some have viewed creation as simply the background to salvation, whilst others have focused unduly on humans being of equal standing with the rest of creation. This section explores how an understanding of God's purposes in creation has evolved. The key question – which has echoed through the centuries – is our role in the created order. Is humankind intended to be separate from and have dominion over all creation, or is our role to be part of the restoration, renewal and completion of God's original purpose in creation?

The Early and Medieval Church

The Desert mothers and fathers in the Early Church often sought solitude in wild places in which to better worship and contemplate God. This sometimes triggered the celebration of a very different nature to that found in cities and a closeness and friendship with wild animals as typified by St Jerome and the lion. This tradition was much stronger in the Eastern Church and was in marked contrast with that of the Western Church which saw the wilderness as a place of spiritual warfare as portrayed in gospel accounts of Christ's temptation, even if the battle with Satan was tempered with Christ's ministry to the wild animals (Mark: 1, 13).

The Celtic Church is often characterised as having as especial awareness of God in Creation captured in the 'nature poems' crafted by hermit monks. But a recent re-evaluation of these sources by Bradley warns against an over-romanticized reading drawn from 19th sources rather than the original texts which are often more focussed on sin and judgement and less on the beauty of the landscapes in which the Celtic monks lived.

The most celebrated medieval source exploring humankind's role in creation is the teaching of St Francis of Assisi. By living very close to nature, the harmony of the Garden of Eden was almost restored as epitomised in his famous *Canticle of the Creatures*. But, as with the Celtic saints, we must be careful of over-romanticizing Francis' remarkable relationship with animals and birds and his contribution to modern ecological thought.

The Renaissance, Reformation and the Enlightenment

As the early modern world began to take shape from 1500 onwards, the instruction in Genesis 1: 26, 28 that human should have dominion over the rest of creation was given greater authority by both the Church and emerging nation states. In particular, Protestant Europe, and soon the colonies established on the east coast of America, saw the wilderness as a place that should be "tamed" and made productive. The onset of the agricultural revolution in which common land was enclosed, wood felled, marshes drained and heaths reclaimed was eventually to result in the patchwork which, for example, makes up "the green and pleasant land" of Southern England, much beloved today. This shift from a feudal system of land management, in which much was held in common and used sustainably, to one where individual entrepreneurs extracted maximum profit with little regard for environmental damage, marked the shift to a market economy based on unbridled capitalism. The impact of this can be seen especially in parts of the western USA where rivers no longer reach the sea, giant redwoods are logged, soils have been mined of their fertility and whole

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species rendered extinct. And for some Christians such a domination of nature is entirely consistent with biblical teaching

An alternative view

But alongside this, an alternative understanding of humanity's response to God's creation was emerging, triggered by a growing appreciation of wonder in mountain scenery, and a sense of awe and God's presence in wild places. This new understanding was stimulated by William Wordsworth and his heightened sense of communion with nature as he walked the Lakeland Fells. It also found expression in the writings of Henry Thoreau living beside Walden Pond in Massachusetts and Scots-born John Muir exploring the Yosemite Valley in California. God became fused with his creation and nature was seen as exercising a moral force. But the pantheist mysticism of these writers and their implied critique of 19th century capitalism sat ill at ease with orthodox Christian belief which generally endorsed the contemporary social order. That critique was to find new momentum in the 20th century and the emergence of a "green consciousness" given concrete expression by millions finding recreation and spiritual refreshment in the countryside and National Parks and, from 1960 onwards, the emergence of increasingly vocal environmental NGOs questioning the affluent society and its attendant consumerism.

Eco-theology and a new monasticism

Theologians have recently contributed to this re-thinking of our understanding of God's purposes in creation often stressing that given the importance of the Incarnation, Christianity is the most material of the world's religions. Writing within the evangelical tradition, Francis Schaeffer has argued that the instruction to have dominion over nature had been misconstrued: instead Christians are called to heal the world of sin by loving one another and caring for nature. The Orthodox tradition stresses a priestly role in which the whole world is offered back to God in praise and thanksgiving: the mystery of the priest's role balanced by a humanizing of the material world. The German theologian Jürgen Moltmann offers a more God-centred theology which reasserts God's immanence within his creation and focuses on the importance of resting on the Sabbath and during times of Jubilee. In promoting 'creation spirituality' the Catholic writer Matthew Fox provides an alternative to the orthodox belief in original sin, fall and redemption by Christ. But many have questioned Fox's views which appear to diminish the importance of the transcendence of God and the Incarnation. As the attached reading list demonstrates, eco-theology provides a lively branch of current writing in academic theology.

Theory has also recently informed practice with the spawning of many new monastic communities variously inspired by Celtic and Benedictine traditions often founded in locations with strong historical significance such as Iona (the Iona Community) and Lindisfarne (Northumbria Community and the Community of Aidan and Hilda). Other groups such as the Pilton Community in Dorset, the Scargill Community in Yorkshire and on-line groups such as the EarthAbbey seek to live by a rule which is more in tune with the earth offering a message of hope and healing. By seeking to give more back to God of what they have received by his grace, these communities also offer a powerful critique of present-day affluence and consumerism.

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In the beginning the Word was green...

- faith perspectives rooted in the creation stories

The first two chapters of Genesis record two different creation stories, both of which have roots in ancient myths. The first is the story of creation in six days, culminating with the Sabbath as a day of rest and celebration. This story was written to declare that everything is dependent for its existence and meaning upon the sovereign God, rather than as an ordered or scientific account of the origins of the cosmos. The crowning part of the story is the creation of humanity, with the expression 'made in the image' reflecting the privilege and responsibility given to humanity of overseeing God's rule on earth.

The second story, sometimes known as the 'garden' story, tells of the forming first of man and then of woman in the Garden of Eden and includes the story of the 'fall'. This story comes from a different tradition to the first story. It was concerned with providing answers to some fundamental questions facing the faith community of Israel, including the refusal of humans to acknowledge the sovereignty of God and the consequence of this action. This second creation story moves from a pre-historical state of harmony in creation to the fall, symbolised by an act of environmental disobedience.

These creation stories may be viewed as a set of pictures that portray the relationship between God, humanity and the rest of the created order. Whilst they were written against the background of particular economic, social and political circumstances, they contain some insights which transcend time and circumstances.

Doctrine of Creation

1. Both creation stories in Genesis helped to shape the doctrine of Creation, in which it is held that the world and all that it contains comes from the free creative actions of a loving God. This may be interpreted in different ways. What is widely agreed is that God's involvement in creation is about producing something out of nothing. For some, this 'something' is the bricks and mortar of the planet, for others, that God created the potential for the development of the cosmos.

2. The first story of creation is presented in a form that suggests an association with an act of worship. Whilst the origins of the account may have been passed down orally through generations, this narrative reads as if it is carefully crafted material used in worship. The story reveals that on successive days God created yet more wonders and at the end of most days there is a refrain, that '**God saw that it was good**' or 'God saw that it was very good'. It is possible to imagine a priest reading the story in worship and the congregation responding with the refrain.

The refrain in Genesis reminds us that the whole of creation has value in God's eyes. Whilst it is indeed a matter of human self-interest to care for the planet, there is a danger that the planet is viewed solely from a human perspective. For example, humanity might stop clearing tropical forests because they might contain a plant with cancer-curing properties. This is a 'what is in it for us' or anthropocentric attitude. The refrain reminds worshippers that God values the whole of the created order, from aardvark to zebra, from shrimp to blue whale, from ragged robin to the giant redwood, the land, the sea and the air. Caring for the whole of creation

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demonstrates our love of God; destroying creation is akin to spitting on the cross-bound face of Christ.

In the first story of creation, humanity is given a distinctive place and a particular responsibility within the created order. The words used in Genesis are to '**subdue**' and '**have dominion**'. These words have a rich heritage within the Judaic-Christian tradition but, over the years, have sometimes been understood in less positive ways. For example, in an influential article published in the journal *Science* in 1967, Lynn White, citing the command to subdue and have dominion, laid the blame for many environmental ills on the Judaic-Christian heritage. Whilst there are elements of truth within his thesis, the article has been criticised because it does not adequately account for the environmental destruction in times and places not touched by the Judaic/Christian tradition. White's historical perspective of the Christian tradition is not a critique of the teachings of the Bible, but rather a critique of what the text has been taken to mean at certain periods of history; how it has motivated specific activities; and how it has come to sanction a particular attitude to the natural world.

So what does '**to subdue**' and '**have dominion**' mean?

The command within the Genesis story 'to subdue' the earth is a translation of the Hebrew word *kabash*. The word is used, with reference to land, elsewhere in the Old Testament within the context of conquering the Promised Land, which indicates a strong use of the word. To place this in context, it is necessary to consider the difference between the life of the people of Israel two thousand years before Christ and, indeed, in the time of Christ, and typical life in the 21st century in the west. In Biblical times, life was more precarious. Many people lived 'on the edge' of existence, their lives over-shadowed by a variety of threats including earthquake, wind and fire, famine and drought and from animals marauding their homesteads, flocks and crops. Given this context, 'to subdue' can be understood to be concerned with bringing order and well-being rather than wreaking destruction. One of the most obvious ways of achieving this well-being, a commonplace in pre-modern societies, was making farmland out of wilderness in order to provide food for one's family. It is also worth noting that Jesus revealed his mastery of creation by calming the storm so that life and order might continue.

The word 'dominion', which is a translation of the Hebrew word *radah*, is used in Genesis with reference to a relationship with regard to other living creatures: fish, birds, cattle and creeping things. To have dominion is sometimes understood in a secular context as meaning to do what you like, which may include autocratic or despotic models of management, but its use within the Old Testament has a different understanding. Old Testament kings were called to exercise their reign with due regard to the well-being of their subjects, other creatures and the land. The intention of the command 'to have dominion' is to call those made in the image of God to rule in a way that reflects the teaching given by God. An alternative reading of the word 'dominion' as having total control of the rest of creation is a very modern interpretation which seeks to re-make the world according to human design and aspiring to a level of control that truly belongs to God.

3. The garden story of creation gives another perspective on the relationship that humanity is called to have with nature. The story opens with a garden into which the man, Adam, having been formed from the dust and given breath, was placed. The man was then commanded to **till and care for** the soil. The story

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reminds us that we are a part of nature but with a particular responsibility for it. We have the privilege of sharing God's garden, but responsibilities in our use of it. In the garden story there is a sense of God calling us to tend and care, till and cultivate a living, loving relationship with the earth from which we came, and to which we will return.

The story also marks the symbolic start of a dynamic journey for God's people from the Garden of Eden to the City of Gold (Rev 21:18). A journey in which God's people, travelling through time and against a variety of economic, social and political circumstances, are called to transform individual and community life in response to the revelation of God's purpose. The true 'end' of creation is the Kingdom of God on earth, rather than a return to some virgin Eden.

4. **Sabbath** – a time of rest and celebration. The first account in Genesis tells of six days of creative activity followed by a seventh day when God rested. The story points to the need to set aside production and consumption for a period and to reflect, give thanks and worship. Observing the Sabbath reminds the Church and the world that life has a spiritual dimension as well as a material one. By observing the Sabbath, worshippers are encouraged to view life as a means to God's purpose and God's end, rather than the earth as a means to an end in life.

5. **Fall** – the disobedience of humanity. The story of the fall is related in Genesis 3 which first tells of the life of bliss in the garden and the intimate delight in the relationship between God and Adam and Eve. The story then records the desire of humanity to become 'like gods' and is made explicit in the taking of the fruit from the forbidden tree. The punishment given was their expulsion from paradise and their condemnation to a life involving suffering. It is notable that the fall is symbolised by an act of environmental disobedience. In speaking of a lost paradise, the story has a mythical quality, but it has been used through the years to explain the problems of evil and suffering in the world through the separation from God and it is a powerful sign of the yearning that humanity has for a better world.

The following section deals with the relationship between God, humanity and the rest of creation since the fall. The Biblical account consistently reveals the love of God and the striving and struggling of humanity to participate in the transformation of a scarred creation into a new heaven and a new earth.

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The Biblical journey to a new heaven and new earth

Sin - the sense of being separated from God's purpose.

Humanity's disobedience to the will of God is revealed throughout the Bible. In many instances this has the consequence of bringing sadness to God and separation of humanity from God's purpose. For some, the suffering caused by human sin is understood to be part of the judgement of God, for others it is that humanity is separating itself from the purpose of God. The flood in the time of Noah may be understood to be both an act of judgement and an act of salvation and the rainbow covenant which follows is a promise from God made to Noah and all living creatures never to destroy the earth by a flood again. However, as with all covenants or agreements, there is an assumption that the other party has a part to play too. In this respect humanity has moral responsibilities which include an ecological dimension. Failure to exercise the command to till and care for the earth, given in Genesis 2, and worse, to scar creation through human activity, may be understood as a sin and an act of betrayal of the promises and love of God. Despite the sinfulness of humanity, the Biblical account and experiences from the past through to today reveal God's grace and continuing call away from sin and to the purpose of ushering in a new heaven and a new earth.

Creation - God's first Cathedral

Those who have ever paused in a beautiful setting such as a mountain top or quiet river valley may understand the expression that creation was God's first evangelist. Sometimes in such inspiring places people can have a spiritual experience of feeling close to God.

There is a sense in which creation may be viewed as **God's first Cathedral**, a place where God can be found and worshipped. In Psalm 19 these thoughts are found in the opening verses:

*The heavens tell out the glory of God,
Heaven's vault makes known his handiwork.
One day speaks to another,
Night to night imparts knowledge,
And this without speech or language
Or sound of any voice.*

Psalm 19: 1-3

As evangelists of God's good news we should care for God's Cathedral of Creation, for to despoil it is akin to placing a barrier between people and their awareness of God's presence.

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God and time

The Bible is full of stories of people who look back at past events in their lives, the lives of others or the life of their nation, and sense God's presence. God is an eternal God who was, and is, and ever shall be. God loves those in the past, those present now and those still to come. Looking back and finding God's presence in the past can help people to sense God's presence in the present and give an assurance that God will be with them in the future.

The dimension of 'all time' through which God exercises care reminds us to care as God's stewards for the benefit of those alive now and also for those who will be born in the future. It is a time perspective that can make a positive contribution to the wider environmental debate.

The Earth is the Lord's

Much of the Old Testament contains stories of the relationship between God, the people of Israel and land. Psalm 24 opens with a direct attribution that:

*To the Lord belong the earth and everything in it,
the world and all its inhabitants.
For it was he who founded it in the seas
and planted it firm on the waters beneath.*

Psalm 24: 1-2

The picture presented reflects the understanding that the Earth was floating on the depths but anchored by God's subduing of the powers of chaos. Though the imagery is now dated, the understanding presented - that the earth is God's rather than belonging to humanity - is a strong challenge to the principles of ownership that have developed, particularly in western economics. For example, over the past few centuries explorers have gone out from nations across Europe to plant a national flag and claim the territory for their nation in the name of their ruler.

An interpretation of the opening verses of Psalm 24 is that the earth should now be reclaimed as the Lord's. Such action would point us towards changing the nature of the relationship between humanity, land and God. If we understand the Earth as belonging to the Lord, then our relationship to God is more akin to a tenant occupying God's property, with the attendant privileges and responsibilities that this brings.

Holistic Vision

Caring for the 'poor and outcasts' is a Christian tradition developed from the Bible. In practice, Christian care is aimed both at providing relief from poverty and also tackling the roots of poverty. It is increasingly recognised that one such root of poverty is environmental conditions. Christian Aid now recognises that many recent so-called natural disasters involving floods or drought have been partly caused by climate change. Idea for Action 12 *Just neighbours apart* provides many examples of

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the impact of climate change on vulnerable communities in developing countries and suggests actions and campaigns to address these impacts.

God's promise of renewal for the **whole of creation**

The Bible records God's commitment to the whole of creation. In Genesis, the covenant given to Noah after the flood records God's promise:

*I shall sustain my covenant with you:
never again will all living creatures be destroyed by the waters of a flood, never
again will there be a flood to lay waste the earth.'*

*God said, 'For all generations to come,
this is the sign which I am giving of the covenant between myself and you and all
living creatures with you:
my bow I set in the clouds to be a sign of the covenant
between myself and the earth.'*

Genesis 9:11-13

The New Testament also records the renewal of the creation covenant established before Noah's. In Paul's letter to the Church at Corinth it is recorded:

*'For anyone united in Christ, there is a new creation:
the old order has gone;
a new order has already begun.'*

2 Corinthians 5:17

Through Christ there is both redemption and the establishment of a new order – brought about through God coming as Christ to earth. This cosmic new creation finds its fullest expression in the vision of St John the Divine

*I saw a new heaven and a new earth
for the first heaven and the first earth had vanished ...
there shall be an end to death,
and to mourning and pain,
for the old order has passed away*

Revelation 21:1, 4

Incarnation – a religion where matter really matters

If, as the animal charities' saying has it, 'the gift of a pet is not just for Christmas, but for life', so the gift of Jesus Christ is not just for special bits or moments in our world but for all of it. As Archbishop William Temple once put it, '*Christianity is the most materialistic of all religions*'. The heart of Christian faith is the proclamation of a very down-to-earth God, who not only creates and sustains the cosmos, but who is found within it, and who has taken on flesh with us in all aspects of our lives. As the doctrine of Incarnation declares, ultimate reality is manifested in Jesus Christ:

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*the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation...
by whom and through whom all things were created.*

Colossians 1:15-16.

Such an understanding is vital to our times in two important ways.

Firstly, it encourages us to welcome new engagement with the natural world as a celebration of the Word or Wisdom of God present in creation. For since '*the world is filled with the glory of God*' (Isaiah 6:3; Psalm 19:1; Ephesians 4:6) ours is a 'sacramental universe' in which the Spirit of God is present 'in, with, and under' the natural elements. Caring for creation therefore is a way to deepen our Christian spirituality as we reconnect with the living God of creation. This is excitingly witnessed to in biblical encounters and theophanies, in traditions such as those of the Celtic saints, the Desert Fathers, St Francis of Assisi and Orthodox experience, in the Christian sacraments, and in the new physics and cosmology of our age.

Secondly, rejoicing in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, we are encouraged to give fresh meaning and purpose to the things of the earth, our bodies and our environment. In all that we do, touch, see, smell, taste or hear, we can share in the life of God. Not for nothing then is our hope summed up in the doctrine of the Resurrection of the Body. We are not destined to live as pure spirits liberated from matter but as transformed whole persons comprised of body, mind and spirit. This solidarity with the rest of the material world is crucial: matter really does matter to God

The present time ... a creation groaning

Often described as 'an environmental mantra,' Romans 8 has been used to mandate environmental activity by Christians. But as Richard Bauckham reminds us, this fails to do full justice to Paul's yearning for a transformation of the existing order:

*We know that the whole of creation
has been groaning and in travail together until now,
and not only the creation,
but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit,
groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.*

Romans 8: 22-23

Following the fall, but within the providence of God, humanity and the rest of creation have been left to suffer the consequences of human actions. Today this includes the impacts of climate change, loss of biodiversity and pollution of the waters and air. As Christians we are called to avoid and, where possible, to repair the damage humanity inflicts on the created order. But like the coming of the Kingdom, although we can anticipate the liberation of creation, on our own we cannot achieve it. Along with Paul and other biblical writers we yearn for the liberation of the created order from the consequences of human sin by God's transformation of the whole of creation at the end of time.

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The 'end' of creation... a transformed creation

To those on the street, both Christianity and the environmental movement may be associated with doom and gloom. The message of the man clad in the sandwich board 'repent of your evil for the end of the world is nigh' seems to go hand in hand with the newspaper billboard declaring the latest earth-threatening environmental ill. Within Christianity the subject of eschatology deals with matters concerning the last days. The Bible includes texts that point towards the 'end'. In the Old Testament this is often associated with the Messianic hope, or the coming of a future Messiah to rule, and in the New Testament to the second coming of Christ, or a day of judgement.

Christian understanding of the last days can influence the way in which people live their lives. In the early church Paul criticises those Christians who lived their lives on the understanding that Christ's return would definitely come within a few years or decades. It is a notion that has been repeated by so-called millennialists who have used dates or events to plot Christ's return. Such beliefs may lead people to question the need to care for the earth if life on earth as it is known is about to come to an end. These perspectives might appear validated by passages such as 2 Peter 3: 7-13, which may be interpreted with the message that the earth is to be consumed by fire and then replaced by a new one. If this is the case, many might ask: what is the point of caring for God's creation if God's grace is going to provide a new creation?

However, to date, the understanding of millennialists has been found wanting. Further, there are questions concerning the correct version of the Greek text. Whilst many translations have used the phrase 'it is burned up' or a variation on these words, the term 'will be found' is an alternative translation from other versions to be understood in the context of judgement and of acts of God in history, rather than the literal end of the world. Within this sense, the passage may be more readily understood as a call to radical transformation rather than the destruction of the present earth and the creation of a new one.

David Bosch writes that Christian eschatology moves in all three times: past, present and future. The reign of God has already come, is coming, and will come in fullness. It is a message of transformation with an understanding that human discipleship is called to play a missionary role in bringing about God's purpose. This understanding is consistent with the verse from the Lord's Prayer: 'your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven' which is both a call to God and a challenge to the prevailing situation.

This understanding of Christian eschatology also unites the Doctrine of Creation with God's purpose for the last days. Through this understanding of eschatology, the Doctrine of Creation is not a one-off event but a continuing process of stewardship and co-creation to which all hands are called to contribute as companions with God. The fulfilment of the Doctrine of Creation is the true end of creation, which is not so much a sum of the individual contributions but the culmination of the work of God.

'The leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations'

Revelation 22: 2b REB

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Mission and environment:

caring for creation as an exercise in Christian discipleship

Christianity is a missionary faith. The end of the gospel of Matthew records the great commission given by Jesus to his disciples to go around the world making new disciples, to baptise people in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and to teach people to follow his commandments.

The first apostles lived this commandment by taking the good news of Jesus around the Mediterranean and further afield and establishing the fledgling church with mission as a prime part of its purpose.

Through the years Christians have continued to undertake mission in various ways. Whilst the 19th century western mission may be characterised as taking God's message around the world, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries an increasing emphasis has been placed on mission as the purpose of every place where the body of Christ meets in fellowship.

Within this context, in 1988 the Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Church developed a model of mission work for local churches. It has become known as the Five Marks of Mission. These five marks have been accepted and developed in other denominations and around the world including, in 1997, the Forum of Churches Together in England (CTE). There are a number of versions of the Five Marks of Mission. The following version was adopted by CTE:

1. to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom
2. to teach, baptise and nurture new believers
3. to respond to human need in loving service
4. to seek to transform the unjust structures of society
5. to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of earth

The marks are a useful tool for local congregations as they:

- are expressed in language that is readily understood by churchgoers
- act as a checklist for churches to assess their current mission work
- aid the formation of targets for more effective mission

The Five Marks of Mission were not defined as a set of aims for churches to 'pic 'n' mix' from, but as a holistic model of Christian mission. This widely accepted framework can both encourage and help churches to incorporate care for God's creation into their programme of witness and outreach, rather than leaving it to the end of an already overcrowded agenda.

*Go therefore to all nations and make them my disciples;
baptise them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and
teach them to observe all that I have commanded you.
I will be with you always, to the end of time.*

Matthew 28:19-20

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Models of **Caring for Creation**

The use of pictures and images has helped people express their understanding of the nature and person of God through the years. The Bible contains many such images, for example the Lord as a Shepherd, which help to convey an understanding of God.

In early Christian times the 'Trinity' was developed as one such model or image, to help people picture God who was revealed as Father/Creator, Son/Redeemer and Holy Spirit/ Sustainer.

People of faith have also drawn on images from the Bible to develop models of the three-way relationship between God, God's people and the created order. The two creation stories in the book of Genesis draw on images of good agricultural practice. In the first story of creation, the sixth day includes a sense of calling to good husbandry, whilst in the command to till and care for the earth, the garden story uses more arable imagery.

Together with other scriptures, these stories have led to the development of a variety of models describing the relationship between God, God's people and the rest of the created order. An outline of some of these models is presented below. Each model is subject to criticism, but taken together they can help to give a basis for developing an holistic Christian understanding of a proper human relationship to God and the environment.

1. The two garden stories taken together with the message from the psalmist, that 'the Earth belongs to the Lord', have led to the development of the **stewardship** model. Stewardship is based on the premise that you are in charge of or have responsibility for something that doesn't belong to you. Stewardship may be perceived as a model that allows the concepts of both 'dominion' and 'subduing' to be held together. A good steward would exercise dominion or rule, not for self-aggrandisement, but on behalf of the landlord and for the benefit of all the creatures under his care and with respect for the physical property itself too. The stewardship model retains the relationship between humanity, the earth and God, for ultimately the steward is accountable to the one who vested the responsibility. However, a difficulty of the stewardship model is that it may become too human-orientated, and there may be a temptation on stewards to place human concerns at the centre.

2. A different perspective is offered by the **co-creator** model. It is drawn from some of the ways that the Bible relates God with humanity. A starting point is the first creation story in Genesis 1:27, where it is recorded that we are made in the image of God:

*'God created human beings in his own image;
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.'*

Genesis 1:27

This concept is also dealt with in Psalm 8, which also has creation as its theme. In this psalm we read:

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*Yet you have made him little less than a god,
crowning his head with glory and honour.
You make him master over all that you have made,
putting everything in subjection under his feet:
all sheep and oxen, all the wild beasts, the birds in the air, the fish in the sea and
everything that moves along ocean paths.'*

Psalm 8: 5-8

Within the context of subduing, the psalmist places humanity just below God in the heavenly order, and attributes almost god-like qualities to humanity. This approach, together with the understanding that God's creative activity continues, has given an insight of humanity as co-creators, working alongside God. As co-creators, humans are attributed with awesome powers and responsibilities. It is a model of privilege but with the danger that, by understanding ourselves as almost God-like, we are in danger of losing the balance and check that God provides and are open to human-centred decisions. The second 'garden' story of creation is a reminder that one of the consequences of playing God is separation from God.

3. Another perspective has been derived from the understanding given in Genesis 1:27 that humans are made in the image of God. In some Christian traditions the priest takes on the role of mediator between the people and God. Extending this to the care of creation, the model of priestly care would be to oversee on behalf of God the care of creation and to offer this care back to God as part of Christian thanksgiving. This **priesthood** model, much favoured in the Orthodox tradition, helpfully includes the concept of acting for God, not like a god. Its basis is not that the care of creation is entrusted to the ordained part of the church, but rather that the whole of humanity is called to be a bridge between God and the rest of the created order, between God's purpose on Earth and God's purpose in heaven. Within this role of priesthood there is an understanding of not just offering sacrifices but taking on sacrifices as a loving act to bring about new life for all. However, this concept is not readily translated across all Christian traditions, in part because of different understandings of the term priesthood. Also, some question any suggestion of the need for a mediator between God and the whole of creation.

4. An associated model to that of co-creator and priesthood is the concept of **companion** with God. This model provides an image of walking with God and experiencing both the joys of creation and tensions of living within it. However, the term can be found wanting in times of difficulty. For example, applying the companion model to the present environmental crisis may give an image of both humanity and God bearing the pain and trials together. However, the model does not necessarily lead to a due sense of human responsibility for the state of the environment, the urgent need to take a new path and the direction of it.

5. The term **covenant** is used in the Bible to describe an agreement or binding relationship, based on commitment. The Old Testament is laid on the foundation of a covenant between God and God's people, Israel. It is an understanding that is developed in the New Testament where, through Christ's life and death, God offers grace to an imperfect humanity. The Old Testament records that obedience may be rewarded by a blessing: for example in Leviticus 26:4 a string of such blessings is offered, including the arrival of rain to swell the crops, if the people obey God's laws and commands. Conversely, later in the same chapter (24:18f), it is made clear that

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the failure to adhere to God's commands will lead to a series of punishments. Within a covenant setting, God's blessing is contingent on observing God's commands which cover a number of areas including some environmental issues!

Whilst many covenants recorded in the Old Testament are of a secular nature, between two leaders, or have a divine/human nature, between God and God's people, the covenant made before Noah at the end of the flood, and recorded in Genesis 9 has a universal aspect. It is made by God to 'every living creature' and reminds us of the value God attaches to all life.

6. A recent model, proposed by Richard Bauckham, which better reflects current scientific understanding of the interconnectedness of the web of life is the view that human beings are **fellow-members of the community of creation**. It reminds us that we share a common earth with, and are not separate from, the rest of creation. It places us not as masters of creation with permission to exploit the earth's natural resources, but rather as participants in the whole community of creation called upon to "Praise the Lord" (as in the joyful Psalm 104). And when we join with the rest of creation in giving glory to God we abandon hierarchy and escape from privileging humanity over the rest of the created order.

7. A final model is that of **belonging**. The people of Israel belonged to families, to tribes and ultimately to God. Belonging is a model that encompasses the relationships of individuals and groups to each other and also the relationship of humanity to God. To 'belong' has notions of both privilege and responsibility, which have a dynamic quality. The Old Testament laid the basis of human relationship to the land and with it came both the privilege of being able to live in a place overflowing with milk and honey and the responsibility to care for it.

To belong involves all in civic responsibility, though for the model to work well within the current environmental situation, the people need to understand that they belong not just to human communities but also relate to other life and the land too.

The above models all offer helpful insights into the proper relationship between humanity, the rest of the created order and God. Whilst none of these models provide a comprehensive framework, they do contain some pictures which, taken together, may offer a more sustainable model to guide our way of life than the current one which dominates our world, based on the foundation of unfettered economic growth and human greed.

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Additional material (an extended version of pp 2-3)

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 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.

¹ Bauckham, R. (2011) *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.

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

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

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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 and 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 and, given occasional devastation by plague, the population only increased modestly. As a result the natural realm in the medieval period could, for the most part, be managed in a reasonably sustainable manner.

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 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'.

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

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.

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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-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.

The emergence of eco-theology

⁹ Cronon, W. (1994) Landscapes of Abundance and Scarcity in *The Oxford History of the American West* ed. Milner C A *et al.*, pp. 603-637, Oxford University Press.

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

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

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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, Moltmann'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.

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-

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*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 124 ff.

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

¹⁶ Northcott, M. S. (1996) *op cit.*, 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.

¹⁹ Fox, M. (1991) *Creation Spirituality*, Harper & Row, San Francisco.

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

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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.

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.

²¹ Bauckham, R. (2011) *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology*, Baylor University Press p.198.

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

²³ *Ibid.* pp 208-9.

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.

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Useful websites

Christian Aid <http://www.christianaid.org.uk/>

SCIAF - Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund <http://www.sciaf.org.uk/>

Christian Ecology Link: www.christian-ecology.org.uk

Operation Noah: www.operationnoah.org

A Rocha UK: www.arocha.org/gb-en

John Ray Initiative: www.jri.org.uk

Church of England's Environmental Campaign: www.shrinkingthefootprint.org

See also *The Journal of Religion, Nature and Culture*