

Environmentalism and spirituality

Why should we care about looking after creation?

Back in that heady summer of 2005, the G8 in Gleneagles made many promises to the poor of the world. It wasn't long before many of those commitments were scaled down and many are currently not being met. In April 2009 an even larger group of nations, the G20, with leaders who claimed to speak for 85% of the people of the world, pledged \$1.1 trillion dollars to tackle the present economic crisis. It was noted by many that the 15% of the world's people who were not represented by the leaders in London, included some of the very poorest. The lack of a voice for many of the world's poorest perhaps also led to another disappointment.

There was much talk, before the summit, of the leaders agreeing to a 'Green New Deal', whereby measures aimed at reviving the economy would also be built upon principles of environmental justice with the development of new environmentally-friendly ways of doing business. In the end, there was much disappointment, with many commentators claiming that the environmental measures were just 'tacked onto the end', as an afterthought.

It has long been thought that the relief of the poor is a 'spiritual issue'. As global warming becomes a greater and greater threat to us all and climate change has a disproportionate effect on the world's poorest people, can we now say the same about caring for God's creation?

Are environmental issues a spiritual issue?

Should spirituality be linked to the environmental movement?

My earliest memory of anything connected to the environmental movement was when, as an eight year-old, I watched Apollo 8 going round the Moon, one snowy afternoon in December 1968. The photographs which came back to earth, of a vulnerable-looking world, surrounded by empty, airless, black space, acted as an injection of urgency into what was then a nascent environmental movement. It also had a spiritual value, reminding us all that, for all our great technological achievements, Earth is God's creation.

In Genesis, humans are given dominion and responsibility over this creation, as the most intelligent animal on the planet. Yet it can be argued that we have not looked after this creation, polluting the water and the air and greedily grabbing resources, leading to a man-made crisis. And it is a crisis which is with us NOW. Climate change is a present crisis, for those whose livelihoods are dependent on rains which now longer come with the regularity they traditionally have, or with a force which floods their land. It is argued that it is our own human arrogance which has caused our problems. The ecological crisis is also becoming a poverty crisis. In the words of Joni Mitchell we have to 'get back to the garden'. But how can we do that?

A brief history of the environmental movement

As humans, we have to some extent, been trying to put right what we have done wrong for at least two centuries now. The beginnings of the modern environmental movement can be seen in the reaction to events in Minimata Bay in Japan 1959. It was there that first cats and then humans began to become ill after eating fish,

poisoned by lead poured into the bay, by a local factory. This growing awareness was strengthened by the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962. This book outlined the dangers of man-made chemical sprays. Another man-made problem became only too apparent in the sea off Britain in 1967, when the Torrey Canyon went aground off the Scilly Isles, pumping tons of dirty black oil into the sea. A year later, we had the sight of Apollo 8 going round the Moon and its famous 'earthrise' photograph.

Two years later, 22nd April 1970, saw the inaugural Earth Day and the same year saw President Richard Nixon introducing his Environmental Act into Congress which led to the Environmental Protection Agency, following the passing of Clean Air Acts in the UK. The fact that environmentalism was being taken more seriously was shown in 1977, when President Carter intervened personally in the re-housing of families from a street where young children had been badly affected by poison seeping from a toxic waste dump under their houses at the ironically-named Love Canal. As is so often the case, it was a poorer neighbourhood which was affected by the environmental degradation. This has been repeated many times down the years, including the plight of the Spokane Indians in the U.S.A. who felt forced to agree to receiving waste from the Dawn Mining Company, because they were so poor, while it has also been noted that, "West Africa has often been the dumping ground for toxic waste from the United States, although the local communities were not aware of the dangerous nature of the substances they agreed to 'store' for a lucrative fee." (Gordon Aeschliman, *The Green Bible, New Standard Revised Edition*, p. I-92 - I-93)

It was perhaps inevitable that there came a backlash in the early 1980's, when newly-elected right-wing leaders such as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher played down environmental fears. These fears were realised again however, with the appalling Union Carbide factory explosion in Bhopal, India 1984, which killed over 2 000 people, and two years later came the explosion at Chernobyl in 1986 in the old Soviet Union, which released nuclear dust into the atmosphere, affecting farming thousands of miles away.

A hole in the Ozone layer, which protects us from dangerous ultra-violent rays, was discovered in the late 1980's being caused by human use of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), etc. It is heartening to see that this was one problem caused by humans which was also SOLVED by humans. In 1992, representatives from nations from around the world met at the first Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The Rio summit highlighted the growing concerns about global warming, which grew further as the 1990's wore on. This led to the Kyoto Agreement of 1997, which was soon signed by all wealthy countries except the U.S.A. and Australia. A further boost to awareness of climate change came with the release of the Oscar-winning film *An Inconvenient Truth* in 2005, narrated by ex-Vice President Al Gore. Environmentalists are now hoping that real progress will be made at the summit in Copenhagen 2009, where a successor treaty to Kyoto needs to be agreed. So if we have belatedly begun to realise how important it is to live harmoniously with the environment, how did we forget to do so in the past?

Why did humans stop living in harmony with the environment?

It is argued that the problems began with the debate in Ancient Greece between Plato and Aristotle. The latter believed that our thinking should be intrinsically related to our environment, while the former believed that our thinking should be 'above' the world in which we live. Plato won the argument and as his thinking went on to influence Christian thought, so Western beliefs about the environment began to see the environment as little more than a resource for us to use as we wish. The idea of **domination** as opposed to **dominion** of the Earth grew and the idea of good stewardship was largely ignored. Just as these ideas were being questioned in the early 17th century, so the philosopher Descartes proposed that we see nature with nothing more than 'detached observation'. This also saw the separation of science and religion, which continues to this day and has arguably done so much damage over the last 300 years. It ends up with the absurd question asking, "if a tree falls in the forest and no person is there does it make a sound?" There are interestingly some signs now of a reconciliation of the two disciplines, which I believe augurs well for the future.

Two hundred years later and the Industrial Revolution was well underway and this detachment from nature was seen as a virtue as resources were used to feed the new industrial growth. The Romantic Movement in art and literature, including writers such as the Brontes and painters such as Turner rebelled against this activity, but it carried on relentlessly anyway.

Many in the Christian Church of the time came down firmly on the side of the views of Plato and Descartes, as wealth was seen as a display of God's favour. It is true that industrialisation has led to economic development, which has helped to pull many people across the world out of poverty. However, we are now beginning to pay a terrible price for development, which has not taken into account its effects on the environment. The result has been that human greed and arrogance have led us to the present environmental crisis. If that is the case, how can we view the environment in a more ethical way in the future?

Ethics and the environment

At the centre of much thought about ethics and the environment is another debate, that of 'human centred ethics', based around the rights of humans, as against 'deep ecology', which seeks to extend those rights to other creatures, and even to inanimate objects such as rocks. Back at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, J.S Stuart Mill's ideas were very influential and these seemed to suggest that great wealth showed that God favoured you. This was taken up by many of the Christian churches and led to such disfigurement of the environment that in 1967 the historian Lynn White blamed Christianity for the ecological crisis.

More recently however, there has been an increasing challenge laid down to the traditional cost/benefit analysis, which did not include environmental costs over the long term. This and growing awareness of the dangers posed to us all by climate change has helped to lead to the re-emergence of the idea of stewardship in Christianity. Does the natural world have moral status?

The spirituality of environmentalism

Those who work for the environmental organisation A Rocha would seem to agree that the environment does indeed have a moral status, as they seek to take Christian values and put them into action to help them to be good stewards of God's creation.

Care for the creation is also seen in traditions other than Christianity. In Islam it is noted that Mohammed's observations about the environment were: 'Whoever plants a tree and diligently looks after it until it matures and bears fruit is rewarded' (A. Gore *Earth in Balance*, p. 260-1). In Hinduism, concern for the environment can be seen in the *Atharvaveda*, a prayer for peace, which emphasises the links between humankind and all creation as follows: "Supreme Lord, let there be peace in the sky and in the atmosphere, peace in the plant world and in the forests: let the cosmic powers be peaceful: let Brahma be peaceful; let there be undiluted and fulfilling peace everywhere" (ibid. p. 261).

In Sikhism, there is also a tradition of looking after the environment as its founder Guru Nanak said, "Air is the Vital Force, Water the Progenitor, the Vast Earth the Mother of All: Day and Night are nurses fondling all creation in their lap." Buddhism has also spoken for nature. E. F. Schumacher has written about a 'Buddhist economics', the keynotes of which are described as being, "simplicity and non-violence". This should include a commitment to obtaining the "maximum well-being with the minimum consumption", as opposed to the traditional economists ideal of maximising economic growth at all times. Instead of consumption being the best way to measure the health of an economy, as it is regarded as an end in itself, Buddhist economics, "is the systematic study of how to attain given ends with the minimum means". (E. F. Schumacher, quoted *The Green Reader* p. 156-160)

Lastly, in terms of eastern faiths, the Baha'i faith tells us a number of things about spirituality and the environment. As the faith was founded in 1863, and so the only one here considered that was founded during the period of accelerating industrialisation it is particularly interesting in what it says. Its founder, Mirza Husayn Ali, who was from Persia, where so much of the world's oil was about to be discovered, warned humans, "not only to properly regard the relationship with nature, but also the one between civilisation and the environment." He argued that; "We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions." (A. Gore, *Earth in the Balance*, p. 260-2)

From the West there are of course, the Native American beliefs, which were firmly rejected by many of the Europeans who went over the wide Atlantic Ocean and became Americans. The following is a long quote, but I think worth including in full, to demonstrate Native American spiritual teachings on the care of the environment. It comes from the response of Chief Seattle in 1855, when President Franklin Pierce told him that he would like to buy his land from him:

"How can you buy or sell the sky? The land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them? Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people.

If we sell you our land, remember that the air is precious to us, that the air shares its spirit with all the life it supports. The wind that gave our grandfather his first breath also received his last sigh. The wind

also gives our children the spirit of life. So if we sell you our land, you must keep it apart and sacred, a place where man can go to taste the wind that is sweetened by the meadow flowers.

Will you teach your children what we have taught our children? That the earth is our mother? What befalls the earth befalls all the sons of the earth.

This we know: the earth does not belong to man, belongs to the earth. All are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.

One thing we know: Our God, is also your God. The earth is precious to Him and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its Creator.” (ibid., p. 259)

Christian beliefs and environmentalism

Bearing in mind the last quote from Chief Seattle, perhaps the best place to start with is Celtic Christianity. What can be detected in all of the faith traditions mentioned above is a veneration of the natural environment. As Alistair McIntosh has noted in *Soil and Soul*, this is the word which W. C. MacKenzie used in his history of the Hebrides in 1919 to describe the spiritual relationship between the people there and the land: “Veneration! That was at the root of the religion of the Lewis people of old, alike when they were pagans, Roman Catholics, Episcopalians and Presbyterians.... When the people of Lewis were first baptised as Christians, mainly, it is to be assumed through the instrumentality of the Columban church, the new creed was grafted onto the old. The graft of Christianity upon paganism produced a nondescript fruit, which was neither Christian nor heathen. The names of the deities were changed, but the essence of the old creed remained unaltered. The policy of the medieval Roman Church was not to destroy, but to assimilate.... Veneration is to religion is what sap is to a tree. In medieval and post-medieval times, the people of Lewis were profoundly religious, in the sense that they were deeply reverential”. (W.C. Mackenzie, *History of the Hebrides*, p. 144-5, quoted in A. McIntosh, *Soil and Soul*, p. 41)

It can be argued that this veneration for the environment within Christianity is natural given the prominence given to creation stories in the early pages of The Bible. It is further argued that Christianity gives us a duty to look after the environment once we accept the idea that God gave us dominion over the earth, rather than domination. This way of thinking was given further impetus in 2008, by the publication of the first ever *Green Bible*, a fascinating new presentation of the new Standard Revised Edition of the Bible. All the passages which can be seen to relate to care of the environment are printed in green ink, while it is prefaced by over 100 pages of commentary, which reflect the new green consciousness spreading through the Christian churches.

How can Christianity help the environmental movement?

Given the criticisms laid at Christianity's doors by people such as Lynn White and many others in the past, what can Christianity now offer the environmental movement in a positive way? It has been noted by Professor Tim Jackson, that Christian spirituality played certain important roles in Western society in the past – as a comfort, as a reward, as therapy, as a social institution. He also argues that it can be seen that these functions have now been taken over by consumerism, the very same consumerism which is now helping to fuel the ecological crisis.

Can Christianity then help to lead the fightback, by reminding people of spiritual values, which can give them a satisfaction which consumerism can never give? I firmly believe that consumerism is like a drug, in that buying things only wants you to have more, and newer things, so that satisfaction is never truly achieved.

How can Christianity start to express its environmental responsibilities?

There are a number of Christian organisations which are involved in environmental work. A Rocha, an organisation which was founded in Portugal, are now active in Britain as well, with a number of environmental projects inspired by a Christian belief in helping the poor and looking after God's creation.

Christian climate organisation, Climate First! have pointed out that the amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere and the average temperature were both rising together and that if present trends continue during this century, an average global temperature rise of up to 6 degrees Celsius could result. However, the change in temperature in the Arctic is expected to be disproportionately great, with potentially disastrous consequences. Climate First! agree that some natural factors are involved in the rise in CO₂ and accompanying rise in temperature, but they can't explain the recent warming and so it has to be assumed that man-made factors have made a huge difference. It is this that will possibly cause the Arctic Ocean to be free of summer ice as early as the Summer of 2020. In order to stop this potentially catastrophic event, Earth First! claim that emissions must peak by no later than 2016. Clearly there is the need for a clear and urgent vision at the Copenhagen Climate Conference later this year. Climate First! argue that we must start taking action at individual, community, national and international level, both in what we do and in terms of putting pressure on politicians to act.

So why should all this be of particular concern to Christians? Well, firstly as highlighted in the selection of quotes at the beginning of this piece, we have a responsibility to be good stewards of God's creation. But there is also another pressing reason why we should care. While it is the wealthy nations who have done most polluting, it will be the world's poorest who are hardest hit.

This point is also highlighted by another Christian organisation, Tearfund. Tearfund have a 10-year vision to lift 50 million people out of spiritual and financial poverty, a job which is not being made any easier by the effects of climate change. If the Arctic becomes ice-free, or for that matter, West Antarctica's ice melts, then the sea-level will rise appreciably. If the sea level rises by 1m then a quarter of Bangladesh will be flooded, while if it rises by 5 m then half of Bangladesh will be under water. Similar scenarios will of course happen in other low-lying parts of the world. It is estimated that there could be as many as 400 million environmental refugees across the world by 2050. But this is not just some horrible, future scenario, to be treated like the story line of some scary science fiction film. Climate change is happening in the here and now.

1 in 3 people in the West African country of Malawi go hungry for at least three months of every year, because of the effects of climate change. Droughts and then floods, mean that they never have enough harvested food to manage for the whole year. It is impossible to grow crops during the droughts and the floods bring up to 60 cm of sand, which settles on top of the good soil and has to be removed before planting and harvesting can take place.

According to Tearfund this is a problem occurring across much of Africa. In many areas there is a lack of reliable rainfall, so that African farmers are having to gamble

with the planting of their crops. Other places are experiencing too much rainfall. All this is helping to cause the movement of environmental refugees, who will mostly end up in neighbouring countries, a scenario which almost inevitably lead to greater tensions within the host countries, whose inhabitants may also be already short of resources.

Tearfund also emphasise the importance in Christianity of relationships. He stated that we are neighbours of people we have never met and Christianity is about relationships; with God, with other people and with Creation. Accordingly, Tearfund give us a vision of what the church might do to combat the problems mentioned above. It was noted that the church has a major role to play, helping poor communities to adapt to climate change, while the church can also play a prophetic role in speaking out about the situation, while also becoming counter-cultural in adopting an anti-consumerist stance.

And the future?

It is now commonly accepted that climate change is happening and that it is largely being caused by human activity. It is also clear that climate change is having a detrimental effect on agriculture in many parts of the world. And here we have the greatest irony: it is the world's richest who are causing most of the climate change, but it the world's poorest who are being hit the hardest. It seems clear to me that, a spiritual approach to the care of the environment is both long overdue and potentially of great use. It is overdue, particularly in the West, where for such along time, the Christian church connived at the rape of the earth for resources fuelled by human greed. It is potentially of great use, as churches can act in the hearts of communities across the Western world, in encouraging a responsible attitude towards the earth and backing it up with a traditional Christian emphasis on caring also for the poor, who are the worst affected by climate change and other environmental degradation.

Faced with the double whammy of a global economic crisis and the nightmare of uncontrollable climate change, it surely is time for as real 'Green New Deal', the kind written about before the G20 meeting of April 2009. Just tacking token green measures onto any economic deal, will not be sufficient to deal effectively with global warming and its terrible effects on the world's poor. Surely future economic development should be aimed first and foremost at pulling the one billion of our fellow humans who live in abject poverty today out of their misery, with a view to dealing long-term with climate and poverty problems, so that future generations can live without these threats. This can only be done by a serious approach, which fits the definition of sustainable development as, "development that can meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to met their own needs". (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987, quoted in Rogers, Jalal and Boyd, *An Introduction to Sustainable Development*, p. 42)

These are not new ideas. If we look at the roots of many of the spiritual traditions which people across the world follow today we will see that the idea of sustainable development is firmly rooted in them. Saving the planet and helping the poor are tasks which can be spiritually inspired and should be of concern to us all.

Peter Sagar, May 2009

