

ECOLOGY

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Ecology is the scientific study of the distribution and abundance of living organisms and how the distribution and abundance are affected by interactions between the organisms and their environment.

Which leads on to the nature centred, biocentric or ecocentric view which says that men and women are part of their environment, they share a common life force with all forms of life, and all other living creatures occupy this planet on equal terms with us and reverence for life should make us respect them all.

But as Christians, with Alban we say that we: **worship and adore the one true living God who created all things.** St. Francis, patron saint of ecology, saw all of creation, as being loved by God and as loving God. In the Canticle of the Creatures, he said: **All praise be Yours, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains us and governs us, and produces various fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.** Iraneus argued that God includes the fullness of all things ‘in his immensity’ and that nothing exists which is unrelated to God who contains all things and commands all things into existence ‘by his Word that never wearies’. Parables of Jesus and his observations regarding animals and plants eg Mt 6:26-30, show that he valued the earth and living creatures. St. Symeon, an Orthodox theologian, said that **the Divine Eucharist, the bread and the wine, as the elements representative of material nature, become the Body & Blood of the incarnate Word of God, the Maker of creation.** Man has the gift of being the priest who brings creation into communion with the Holy Trinity.

The God centred or theocentric view, holds together human interest and the broader concern for the natural world. There is the value of all creation as we have seen, but also the place of human responsibility. In Genesis 27 we learn that humankind is made in the image of God and in the next verse that they are to subdue the earth and have dominion over everything in it – as God would, a benevolent rule. In Genesis 2:15 we learn that man is to till (or cultivate or serve) and to keep (conserve) the earth, to be **good** stewards, but humankind can also be bad stewards. Good stewardship entails accountability, wise conservation and intelligent use. Edward Echlin quotes Robert Runcie as saying: **It is integral to our Christian faith that this world is God’s world and that man is a trustee and steward of God’s creation who must render up an account for his stewardship.**

Taken to extremes, the covenant is regarded as simply between humans and God and dominion is over the natural world in the service of human industry and human work, a view held by Calvin and other reformers. This is the completely human centred or anthropocentric view of creation, regarding man as the centre of the universe. Nature is essentially available for humans to use and transform at their behest. The natural world is merely the expendable exploitable background for humankind. The environment’s purpose is to provide raw materials for human consumption, by the use of technology and the problems technology has brought will be overcome by technological solutions.

But this has led to an ecological crisis, in which the balance of nature could be said to be very much disturbed, by wrongs, sin, evil, by over dominion by humankind. Severe hurricanes, tornados, snowstorms, floods, forest fires and drought continue to afflict numerous regions of planet earth. The Grove booklet 'Caring for the earth, by Keith Innes lists the following imbalances:

- ***pollution of the air***, by fossil fuels, carbon dioxide, a prime cause of climate change, exacerbated by destruction of forests . Polar ice caps are melting, deserts are increasing, there is a rise in sea level, Bangladesh and other lowlying areas are threatened. etc. Acid rain falls, there are accidents at chemical plants, eg Bhopal in India. There are radioactive leaks from power stations, eg the disaster at Chernobyl.
- ***Pollution of waters***, by sewage, by byproducts of industry, pesticides & fertilizers. In the oceans, there are oil spillages and the dumping of toxic wastes
- ***pollution of earth*** by poisonous or radioactive wastes, overuse of pesticides, DDT etc. mercury, arsenic & lead.
- ***Overuse of the Earths resources.*** of minerals, non renewable energy sources oil, gas coal. There is overfishing, overcultivation, in the search for firewood, the loss of trees, the loss of species highlighted by the present TV series.

So what can be done about this, to get back to the balance of humans and nature? We can use the three routes to decision making, rules, motives and results.

Firstly, the way to right behaviour towards the environment is through rules, following natural law, human law and divine law.

Natural law, upheld by Aquinas, is that all human beings have the natural, created capacity to know the difference between right and wrong, that this sense of right and wrong comes from reason and intuition, shared by Christians and atheists, and that natural law leads to human laws, which ought to reflect natural law. This approach represents a morally principled rejection of the values inherent in the material rapaciousness of modern consumerism with its assault on the beauty and order of the natural world. But Finnis says that the uniqueness of our humanness then is that we do not automatically, like animals, live according to what natural law determines is the good for us. Other criticisms of Natural Law, is because of sin, the requirements of God's law is blurred, that it argues from the way things ought to be, and it is difficult to talk about a natural law, which is common to all people in all places at all times.

As well as natural law, there should be human laws to control the environment. There should be a Code of Ecological Rights, similar to Declaration of Human Rights. The World Council of Churches in 1983 recognised that environmental problems need to be tackled alongside questions to do with justice issues and alongside questions to do with peace issues, and came up with 'Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation'.

There needs to be legislation between nations on such subjects as Climate Change. The last G8 summit recognised the need to have reduction targets and to negotiate these as legally binding, to cutting emissions by 'at least 50 per cent by 2050.' But we have seen how difficult it is to get consensus between nations, with the US holding out against this until recently. But consensus is possible. The damage we were doing

to the ozone layer by Chlorofluorocarbons, CFCs, was recognised and after negotiation of an international treaty (the Montreal Protocol), CFC production was sharply limited beginning in 1987 and phased out completely by 1996.

And there is the divine law, to be found in the bible. When God made the covenant with Noah, he also made it for all the creatures. Gen 9:12,15.17. And there are the law codes in the Old Testament, for the protection and safeguarding of non-human creatures. The land was to be allowed to lie fallow every seventh year Lev 25:4. Every 50 years, on the day of atonement in the Jubilee year, all land must return to its original owner. All land belonged to Lord Lev 25:23. The ox not to be muzzled Dt 25:4. Fruit from the newly planted trees was not to be eaten for 3 years, in the fourth year it was to be offered to God Lev 19:23-25.

The second route is the motives route.

Since God is the Creator of the world and has charged men & women with caring for it, Christians have the strongest possible reasons for a sensitive and caring attitude to their fellow creatures. The Incarnation itself, in which God entered the ecological process in person is the most powerful evidence of the value of the world to God. This motive is very much based on the Christian view, and may not be taken up by those outside the church.

There is an obligation on the part of present humans to hand on to future generations of humans and other living beings a world capable of sustaining life. Our survival depends on a sufficient level of well being in the soil, air & water. If polluted beyond their ability to sustain life, the human race will die out. This is a motive for both Christians and non-Christians, but difficult to put into practise, without rules.

It is fashionable to be green these days, and in a television programme last week the supermarkets were shown to be jumping on the green bandwagon. This is good if everything they claim is carried out, but it could be no more than talk.

And a motive for us all is the enjoyment, and almost spiritual delight that we get from enjoying the world around us. If this were denuded with loss of species & loss of habitat, our standard of living would be so much reduced.

And there is the Results route.

Two examples are given in 'A Handbook in Theology and Ecology by Celia Deane-Drummond. If a greater yield for a crop is needed, to give a farmer a living wage, for public demand for cheaper food, to produce cheap wheat because of competition from Canada & the USA, he may give his crop a high dosage of nitrogen fertilizer, which also produces more pests which have to be given pesticides to kill them, and this will pollute the rivers and the soil. The good result of the higher crop will also result in the evil of pollution.

And again, we hear of the rain forests of the Amazon being cut down, for agriculture, for timber, for cattle ranching, because the population there is growing, it is a developing country with the needs of the poor, the deforestation has a good result for

human survival in that part of the country, for the anthropocentric view. But it changes the climate through an increase in carbon dioxide level in the atmosphere, and the potential loss of medicines are bad results. From the biocentric view, the loss of species and habitat is a bad result. These show how complex the situation is, the results for some are good, the results for others are bad.

The gift of the land was an essential part of God's covenant with Israel, but if the land was defiled by sin, God would 'vomit forth the nation' untrue to its moral responsibility. As Aldo Leopold describes: ***Land is not merely soil, it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants and animals.*** Pollution, extinction of species, destruction of forests and wildlife are crimes against the earth and against humanity. Consumption, the acquisition of wealth and individualistic domination of the world as secured today by technology on the one hand and misguided economic notions on the other at the service of man's desires and his endless needs has resulted in denuding the environment. To live sustainably with the environment results in Shalom, a state of wholeness and integrity, a condition of life that is in harmony with God, other people and nature.

Results should include reducing our carbon footprint, and using renewable sources of energy, living more sustainably & simply, recycling, reducing our food miles & buying more local products and supporting farmers markets, using our gardens, churchyards etc. environmentally.

The daughter of a friend at church was one of the protesters about the trees being felled for the road around Newbury; they were not successful in stopping this, but as a result she went on to do an MA in forestry, and now with six others is managing a wood as a nature reserve in South Wales.

I think the motives are most important, once we settle on those, we can put the necessary rules into place, rules that are seen in the bible, the natural law resulting from God's creation, and to try to get consensus in rules across the whole of the planet, a very difficult thing to do, but it is possible. These rules will hopefully result in actions, both in the wider sphere, the complexity of the deforestation of the rainforests, the agriculture in this country, and in our own homes and in our churches and in our towns and villages. We need to campaign for a holistic approach to the environment (by vocal dissent at least), and to put this into practise where we can.

