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The Theology of Creation Care

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Today I want to look at a few of the reasons why, as Christians, we have had, and continue to have a problem with the earth, and conversely what we might expect of nature if God's Spirit is really with us, if Wisdom and logos, and indeed Christ, are the centre of all being. If we know God primarily as a doing and acting and even changing God

But I want to begin by going back in time to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

This is Hildegard von Bingen, speaking of God:

I am the breeze that nurtures all things green.

And this is Meister Eckhart

Creation is a revelation of God, a home for God, a temple for God. Creation is a grace, an overflow of the goodness and beauty that God is. These are two representatives from the reflections of medieval Christian mystics. Both are expressing God's deep connection to all we call nature.

With this heritage, and that of the Old Testament psalms, why did we as Christians get to the point, in the second half of the twentieth century, when Christianity seemed to be identified with every colour extreme green.

Lynn White, for example, in his *Science* article "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" was able to say with some justification:

Our science and technology have grown out of Christian attitudes toward man's relation to nature.

[Ronald Reagan,] The newly elected Governor of California, spoke for the Christian tradition when he said "when you've seen one redwood tree, you've seen them all."

To a Christian a tree can be no more than a physical fact. The whole concept of the sacred grove is alien to Christianity and to the ethos of the West. For nearly 2 millennia Christian missionaries have been chopping

down sacred groves, which are idolatrous because they assume spirit in nature.ⁱ

We came a long way from the greening of Hildegard, and the love of Meister Eckhart. But in the last decade we are witnessing, even among evangelical churches, and even among many conservative American congregations, a return to the green. Making coherent sense of our connection to nature, however, is still one of the most urgent theological problems we have today. Where is God in nature? How closely is God connected to nature? What story do we find our selves in-- one that includes nature, or one that excludes and ignores it?

.I do not have time today to look closely at the reasons why we have become disconnected from nature. But many causes have been identified. Why has it been possible for the detractors and despisers to make such a good case against us? Why have we not always been God's greatest ecologists? **Why are** all Christians not tree huggers? Quickly, these are some of the reasons.

- In order to avoid idolatry we have overemphasized the transcendence of God and God's separation from nature
- **We have** misinterpreted Genesis, thinking we have dominion over the earth, when really we were meant to care and replenish the earth.
- **Following** Greek philosophy we have separated thought from matter and spirit from body.
- Like all people Christians have come to lose connection from nature through technology, but have found no religious imperative to counter this.
- We share with others an often barely discerned secular worldview in which everything has only pragmatic value.

In the last few decades, however, Christians have begun to critique the technological and modernist influence, and to rediscover God's immanence as well as god's transcendence. We have gone to great lengths to argue that this assumption of dominance is indeed a misinterpretation of Genesis. We should instead be speaking of *care for the earth*. A whole generation of Christian ecologists has argued that careful exegesis of Genesis should lead us to care for nature, not to dominate it, to replenish the earth, and not to destroy it. Andrew Lindzey went as far as to argue that we should be priests between God and nature.

This has all been good. This work of moving from a position which assumed dominance to that of stewardship and care has been a form of **repentance** for at least the last few hundred years of careless technological progress, and for several millennia of devaluing the material at the expense of spirit, or unthinkingly assuming a superiority over the nature in which we are embedded.

We needed to do this work, but it has not been enough. Why?

- First, we are in danger of ending up with the most positive statement being an almost patronizing view of nature. Yes it needs our protection, yes we can manage it. Yes we care for nature.
- Second, Christian ecology has so far had very little impact. There appears to be deep and pervasive lack of interest in creation...This could be our ad.

[Christians care for the earth: Yeah Right]

Why do we not care? Why the indifference? One of the reasons centres around stories. We all live inside a story; this story has an explanation of how it all began, how evil came to be, how God relates to the world, and what will happen in the end. The story points out to us what is important, what we should care about, how things are related. In the past these stories were painted out on ceilings or windows or frescoes in churches. Today we hear the story.

Our story becomes and reflects our worldview.

In Christianity today one of problems is that there are very starkly *different stories* out there. We don't agree about origins; we don't agree about God's connection to the world; we don't agree about how the story will end. Christians have set our story over against the scientific story, forcing many of the young to choose between science and faith. Hence the pain of disunity within the church, and a fracturing which runs much deeper than that which split the denominations. Looking at nature within a theological perspective often becomes very painful.

But our stories also have profound implications for our connection to nature. Since the reformation protestants have placed a heavy emphasis on the salvation story alone. This story hasn't included the earth. Even for Catholics before Vatican II the salvation story dominated. If the earth is not a part of the story it becomes redundant; and care for the earth is hardly a corporate priority.

The latter part of the twentieth century was also dominated by the work of Karl Barth who was famous for his reluctance to use nature as a theological source.

Only the revealed Word of God, said Barth, could reveal the totally other, can tell us a story which does not end in death. Barth was opposing the German church which saw such continuity between German culture and faith; he realized that the Word of God speaking into this culture would oppose it prophetically. For the church at large, however, the de-emphasis on nature as a source has been harmful and has contributed to our alienation.

Tellingly, even Barth did find himself wrestling with what the evolutionary paradigm meant for theological constructs. Many of his conclusions would be untenable today.

Another problem Christians have is that some have constructed a timetable for the end of the story, which includes a burning and discarding of this earth, And that does not lead us to care and conserve. Stephen will be examining this part of the story tomorrow.

Perhaps the biggest challenge of all, however, is that Darwin has given us what seems to be another narrative of origins. All these are reasons why we have difficulty telling a unified and coherent story of God the creator, nature and redemption.

When nature is not a part of our story we withdraw from nature as a window to God. We may still love nature; we may still look after it and be careful with it, but the care of nature will not be a high religious priority. We won't have a coherent understanding of God's presence and redemptive work within nature, or of our connection to that work.

Indeed where missionaries have gone, native peoples have discerned this disjunction. In this country, says Bronwyn Elsmore, “A general feeling among the Maori was that the new religion of Christianity failed in its appreciation of the *holistic nature of the universe—God was removed from the creation.*”¹ When we withdraw from nature we lose an important dimension of our understanding of God, perhaps the most foundational aspect to our connection to God. and we cease to care for the earth as we should.

I have come to believe that holding evolutionary theory in dialogue with theology is absolutely critical to including nature and the evolutionary story as a coherent part of the overall story of God, and especially of God’s Spirit, the same spirit that enlivens and redeems us, the same spirit that brought about the incarnation and the resurrection of Christ.

One of the weaknesses of the church in the west has been an emphasis on the Spirit of God as the Spirit of Pentecost alone. Thus the story only begins in the middle, or near the end with Christ and church era.

In the last decade, especially, we have begun to put that right. Denis Edwards, a RC Australian theologian puts this better than many when he argues that our story, the earth’s story, the story of the Spirit begins with the Big Bang. The Big Bang and the extraordinary story of the expanding universe, at least as we understand it, should be a part of our story. The hundreds of billions of galaxies, should all be a part of our story. The forming and dissolution of stars is the story of God’s Spirit creatively at work. If we see the universe, the earth, this way we are linked to creation by the same spirit we experience in salvation.

On Ash Wednesday in the liturgical churches we are told that we are dust, and unto dust we shall return. This dust, however, is formed in stars, in the death of stars. We are made of stardust.

Brian McLaren does something very similar in his book, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*—linking the Big Bang, the slow evolution of life and consciousness with the biblical story of God, and incarnation.

String theory, or M theory, the idea that we might live as one among parallel universes in hanging in the eleventh dimension should be very interesting to us as Christians, because it is the history of our world. The history of God’s spinning of reality as we know it from the divine Spirit.

Most especially the history of the evolution of life on earth should be our story. Here especially the understanding of Christ as the centre of both salvation and creation is important:

With this perspective Colossians has become one of the key texts of the new consciousness, linking Christ with creation.

Colossians 1:15-17 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible,

¹ (my emphasis) See Bronwyn Elsmore, *Te Kohititanga Marama: New Moon, New World: The Religion of Matenga Tamati*, p. 82.

whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Another such text is Proverbs 8, the close linking of Wisdom, as a hypostases of God, and creation, the understanding of wisdom as the God's creative principle at work:

²² "The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old; I was appointed ^lfrom eternity, from the beginning, before the world began. ... before the mountains were settled in place, before the hills, I was given birth, .. I was there when he set the heavens in place, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep, when he established the clouds above and fixed securely the fountains of the deep, ... Then I was the craftsman at his side..

Another is Romans 8 in which we see the creation as a part of redemption, and God's spirit as close to that process:

The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

[Michelangelo was wrong in a sense.] The biblical picture is of a God entwined in nature. Close to nature. God's character, God's wisdom defines the space of reality.

Thus the urgent theological work of this generation is to try to have a dialogue in which this close/active God is reconciled with our particular understandings and constructions of the evolutionary process. This is our history. This is our God. This isn't always easy. Because there are now, especially multiple interpretations and reinterpretations of evolution, and because Darwinism has been used by some very well known atheists to push an atheistic agenda. It isn't easy because if God is in the process God is also in the tsunami, and in the meteor that struck the earth and destroyed all the dinosaurs. It isn't easy because in allowing that Scripture and experience speak of God as very close to us, we always run the danger of identifying nature and God.

What flows from this understanding of the story of God's spirit in creation?

First, we sense immediately the interconnection of all life. We are made of the dust of stars,All of this is woven together by wisdom, the Spirit of God. If God's spirit is guiding or imbuing the process, God is much closer to us than we might imagine. If wisdom and logos define the guiding principle of reality then we should expect nature to be rich in detail and extravagance at every level of reality and at every level of perception.

Second, all of life is important; all creation is important. We are said to be made in the image of God, in some sense intelligence and an intuition of God are the end of the evolutionary process, but for most of the history of the universe God's spirit was at work in everything else; the bacteria have known the spirit of God for billions of years. WE for

only a few hundred thousand. Out of them we came. Perhaps there are even shadows of the image of God in animals. This shadow we perceive in the rest of creation is a part of the discernment of telos or purpose in the creation.

Third, this means that creation is as it is. WE see it, glimpse it, know it, only in part. It has its own integrity and its own reality, its own “thouness” which must be respected. We will never know it exhaustively. There must, then, be a sense of waiting on the earth; rather than always managing and controlling it. For all the present imperfections of ecological harmony, and for all the brokenness of our reality there is discernable in nature multiple layers of interconnection, and synergy and what can only be called order. The wisdom of God is evident in all of this. One of the ethical repercussions of this insight is that we should hesitate to over-control what has not yet begun to reveal its richness and interconnectedness—whether this be the subatomic particle or the DNA.

Fourth, creation should be seen as a mirror of God. It has always inspired the sense of religious numinosity. And if we approach it again as the locus of God’s spirit it can again inspire the religious sense of awe and wonder.

Fifth, it makes sense of the Christian doctrine of trinity. That God is not the God of the Sistine chapel, but is with us, before us, under us, within us. And not just us but the creation in all its history. it makes sense of the incarnation. God was able to move even closer to matter, to take on the form and inner workings of humanity.

Sixth, Understanding creation and redemption as all a part of one story means that creation has enormous religious significance and value. It too is groaning as it awaits its redemption. If creation is seen as the locus of the spirit, as that held together by Christ, then affirming creation, participating in creation, and seeking out the rhythms and harmonies of nature, and ceasing to do harm to nature will all follow.

Seventh, that beauty is perhaps not in the eye of the beholder. The symmetries and inner workings of nature may indeed be hints and augurs of the beauty of God, and of human and social potential. Thus seeing and apprehending the beauty of the world, whether in a wilderness, a beach, down a telescope or is a moral activity.

Thus our theological journey has taken us from indifference to a new care for nature to a point where we must see and sense the wisdom of God in a dynamic and interconnected living process.

Thus in conclusion, nature must be for us a theological imperative. This will only be the case if we recognize that nature is and always was God’s work, that we are the long last appearance in a process in which God’s love has been at work in marvellous ways. Nature’s story is our story. Our story is the story of nature. This only makes sense within a Trinitarian paradigm. But merging and holding these narratives together can give us new appreciation of God, and of ourselves and of nature we seek to protect.

ⁱ White, 14.