

# The Christian Church, Creation, and Primary RE: Background Notes for Teachers

*There are now many books available on Christianity and Eco-Theology and it is impossible to summarise them here. This is a very brief survey of some of the "highlights" of Christian thinking!*

## The Bible: The Old Testament

There are several passages in the Old Testament to which Christians turn as the basis of their thinking on the natural world:

### **Genesis chapter 1 verse 1 – chapter 2 verse 3 - First Creation Story**

Everything including our environment is created by God and created good. Humanity was created as part of creation but special through being created "in the image of God." This claim is not made for any other part of creation. Humanity is to rule and subdue or dominate the earth but as the image of God this dominion should be based on love and respect for the creator.

### **Genesis chapter 2 verses 4-25 - Second Creation Story**

The story of life on earth. Man was created from the dust and woman created from the man. Hence humanity is a part of creation not greater than creation. Everything was created beautiful and good. Humanity has a special place in creation; at God's side giving names for all living creatures.

### **Genesis chapter 3 - The Fall from Paradise and Perfection**

Creation is still good but no longer perfect. This is because humanity, the crown of creation, the image of God, is no longer perfect. Through human failings a perversity entered creation and remains a feature this world today. It is worth noting that it is *humanity that is perverse and that the rest of creation was corrupted as a result.*

### **Genesis chapter verses 8-17 - Covenant of Noah**

The flood story is fraught with difficulty if taught at the primary stage. But through making a covenant with Noah and all creation after the flood God is showing that creation is still important to Him and that He is still actively involved in it. The flood story is also a reminder that human failing (sin) can have a devastating impact on the rest of creation.

### **Psalm 19**

The creation as a whole is described as though it were the first Cathedral. "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 'Revised English Bible'

## **Psalm 24**

Humanity may rule but the earth still belongs to God and Him alone.

“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 ‘Revised English Bible’

## **The Bible: The New Testament**

### ***1) Jesus: the central figure in the Christian faith***

#### **John’s Gospel chapter 1**

Jesus is identified with the creative “Word of God” through whom all things were created.

#### **John’s Gospel chapter 3**

Jesus came to put the whole of creation right, not just humanity.

‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who has faith in him may not perish but have eternal life. It was not to judge the world that God sent his Son into the world, but that through him the world might be saved.’ John 3:16-17 ‘Revised English Bible’

### ***2) St Paul the Apostle: one of the key New Testament figures and major New Testament author.***

#### **Letter to the Romans chapter 8 verses 19-22**

The whole of creation groans under the weight of humanity’s wrongdoing (sin). Jesus is the one putting that right through making humanity into the Children of God. In doing so Jesus is putting humanity back into a proper relationship with God and His creation.

#### **Second Letter to the Corinthians chapter 5 verse 17**

In Jesus the whole of creation is renewed or made new. This is something that Jesus has begun and for which all Christians are to work towards. So the mission of all Christians should include an active concern for the environment.

## **Christian Tradition**

The Church of England, like most (but not all) Churches, is founded on The Bible and Christian tradition.

**The Doctrine of the Incarnation:** This is central to the Christian faith. Put simply it is the belief that as Jesus, the creator God of the Old Testament, chose to become part of His own creation. As St. Paul put it, Jesus is “the

image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation... by whom and through whom all things were created." Colossians chapter 1 verses 15-16. So in worshipping Jesus as God, Christians are reminded of the importance to God of the material world and hence the importance of the environment. Here's just a selection of what some famous Christians have said:

'All creation is a song of praise to God' - **Hildegard of Bingen** a mediaeval abbess whose works are now immensely popular.

**St. Bonaventure** said of **St. Francis**, "Francis sought occasion to love God in everything ... In everything beautiful, he saw him who is beauty itself, and he followed his Beloved everywhere by his likeness imprinted on creation; of all creation he made a ladder by which he might mount up and embrace Him who is all-desirable." ("Major Life," quoted by Helen Julian.) St. Bonaventure was one of St. Francis' first followers and was immensely influential in the formation of the Franciscan Order of Brothers.

"Over the centuries humans have learnt to cultivate the earth, to harness forms of power, to research and to be resourceful....In exercising our God-given dominion humans are not creating the processes of nature, but co-operating with them...we can control and even accelerate things...but it is an artificial control of essentially natural processes. It is humans co-operating with God....We have developed an extraordinary expertise in controlling and taming nature. In this respect we are "lords" as God meant us and told us to be. But we are also children in our ultimate dependence on the fatherly providence of the God who gives us sunshine, rain and fruitful seasons...If we think of the earth as a kingdom, then we are not kings ruling our own territory, but viceroys doing it on the king's behalf, since the king has not abdicated his throne. God makes people, in the most literal sense, "caretakers" of his property." **John Stott**

"Faced as we are with the progressive industrial exploitation of nature and its irreparable destruction, what does it mean to say that we believe in God the Creator, and in this world as his creation? What we call the environmental crisis is not merely a crisis in the natural environment of human beings themselves. It is a crisis of life on this planet, a crisis so comprehensive and so irreversible that it cannot unjustly be described as apocalyptic." **Jurgen Moltmann** an influential modern theologian.

## **The Church of England says:**

"**Faith in the Countryside**" (1990) is one of the most important reports commissioned by the Church of England's governing body the General Synod. This report calls for the Church to offer "something distinctive and positive to the debate on the crisis of the environment." p.8 Christians are encouraged to be good stewards and custodians of creation for God. They are also encouraged to consider themselves as companions with creation; "We

co-exist and share our world together. The role of companion excludes the possibility of adversarial tactics with nature.” p.9. Christians are also reminded that they are the priests of creation bringing the needs and concerns of creation to God and bringing God’s desires for creation to creation. p.9.

**The Lambeth Conferences** are 10 yearly meetings of Anglican Bishops from around the world. (The Church of England is part of the worldwide Anglican Church). In 1988 the Lambeth Conference identified 5 marks that should describe the activity of all Anglican and Church of England Churches. The 5<sup>th</sup> Mark was “To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation; to sustain and renew the life of the earth.”

## **But there is another view...**

All the references above have spoken of mankind’s place within the natural world as a steward, whose duty is to care for God’s creation. There are, however, a significant minority of Christians who use the same Biblical teachings in a rather different way:

Many Christians have taken (and still do) God’s command to subdue the earth as a license for humanity to do what it likes with the earth. Within this understanding the environment has no value except as a resource for human need. In addition, the belief that Jesus will soon return to save God’s people, while destroying everything and everyone else, has led some Christians to consider environmental concern as sinful and so wrong. Environmental concern is sinful because by caring about this world Christians are doubting God’s will to save them through Jesus. After all, Jesus will make it all anew anyway! This was the view of James Watt, the US Secretary of the Interior, the person in charge of the US Government’s response to environmental concern in the 1980s. You will find that this viewpoint remains prevalent amongst some of the Christians in powerful positions in the USA today – and this knowledge may help you to understand some of the decisions made by the US Government in relation to such things as pollution levels and consumable resources.

