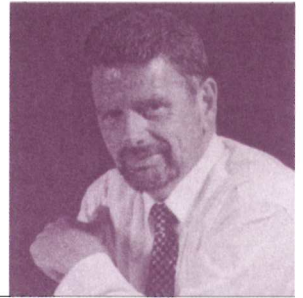


EDITORIAL

COLIN GREENE

THE REVD DR COLIN GREENE is head of theology and public policy at Bible Society and visiting professor of systematic and philosophical theology at Seattle Pacific University, USA. He is author of *Christology and Atonement in Historical Context* and the forthcoming *Christology in Cultural Perspective: Marking Out the Horizons*. He is consultant editor to the Scripture and Hermeneutics seminar.



IN A REMOTE CORNER OF SOUTHERN IRELAND STANDS A LITTLE CHURCH WHERE EVERY WINDOW BAR ONE IS THE USUAL STAINED GLASS DEPICTION OF THE LIFE OF CHRIST AND THE SAINTS. Through the one window of plain glass may be seen a breathtaking view. A lake of deepest blue, studded with little green islands against a backdrop of range after range of heather-clad purple hills. Beneath that particular window is the inscription from Psalm 19, “The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth his handiwork.”

This particular view visible through an ordinary plain glass window encapsulates both the theological and social function of all the creation Psalms (for instance, Ps. 8, 33, 89, 98, 104, 145). Their purpose is not to sketch out a scientific theory about the origin of the world, but to affirm that God’s faithfulness and goodness are experienced through the created order in terms of abundance, generosity, continuity and regularity. Human flourishing can take place because life is experienced as protected space where land, the beasts of the field, the air and the sea. Indeed, the whole ecosystem is a covenanted reality which human beings are intended to enjoy, cherish and protect. When such Psalms are said, sung or read in the context of corporate worship their social function is equally important. They remind us that life is never just a human task of creative ingenuity, technological proficiency or economic profitability. Instead, behind all that remains the sheer givenness of the natural world we did not create. As Walter Brueggemann explains, “The poetic speech of the Psalms is our best language for such givenness, which is not initiated by us but waits for us. There is a coherence that provides a context of our best living. Whenever we use these psalms, they continue to assure us of such a canopy of certitude – despite all the incongruities of life”.¹

Sometimes I don’t think we realise just how much the modern world can distort our relationship with the creation. To think again of that little church in Ireland, it is as if the very project of modernity has, at times, been intent on bricking up that window so that we simply can no longer see that “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth” (Ps. 33.6). So, for instance, Zygmunt Bauman, a postmodern sociologist, postulates that the demise of religion in the modern world is largely due to the ability of the Enlightenment to undermine three classical functions of religion that were intended to continually underline our place in the created order of things.

The first was to bind us to the inviolable natural or supernatural rhythm of life expressed in the continuity of the seasons, migrations and other seasonal variations to which we constantly adapt. This is why a number of medieval theologians affirmed that God had given us two books to read, nature and the Scriptures.

The second was to incorporate us into a clearly stratified social order, be that church or community where our relationship with the created world was continually celebrated and rehearsed.

And the third was to align us with “the apprehension of human destiny, existence and death”. Sober attention to which in this life prepared us for survival in the next.²

In their place modernity constructed another agenda largely orientated to the problems and concerns we had with the created order that we ourselves determined to solve. Science, technology and economics unhooked us from too close dependency on preordained natural rhythms and orders. Increased social mobility untied the bonds of social stratification. The privatisation of religion transformed issues to do with human destiny into a leisure pursuit and death became the sanitised domain of the care professions. Clearly in all of this it is not all loss, but it is most certainly not all gain either. In a world where environmental degradation, ecological catastrophe and the substantial reduction of bio-diversity are all pressing and urgent concerns it is time to relearn again our God given covenantal relationship with the creation.

This issue of *The Bible in Transmission* takes up this singularly important theme. We are indebted to the careful thought and consideration expressed by all our contributors in relation to specific issues that continually threaten the inbuilt harmony and intricate interdependencies of a creation that is still wonderful to behold. David Pickering draws our attention to the important place the churches can occupy in a throwaway consumerist culture when our mission to society is expressed in terms of the stewardship and preservation of the creation. Steven Bouma-Prediger picks up a specific theme that is often overlooked in this debate, the fact that our misreading of Scripture and hermeneutical inconsistency has led others to conclude that Christianity is essentially an anthropocentric religion that pays scant attention to the importance of the created world when compared with the place the creation occupies in some sense of the other world religions. Robin Old outlines some of the most important aspects of the creation spirituality that continually infused the theological

NOTES

1 Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), p. 26.

2 Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity And Its Discontents* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1997), pp. 172–3.

3 Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism or cultural logic of late capitalism” in *New Left Review* 146 (1984), pp. 53–93.

► perspectives and missionary zeal of the old Celtic missionaries and saints. Peter Heslam articulates a fundamental conundrum that threatens the viability of the economic system upon which the Western world at least has become so dependent. Could it be that the “logic of late capitalism”, to quote Fredric Jameson,³ has become so immersed in the profit system that it is in fact unsustainable when pitted against the limits of the natural world? Finally, John Wibberley directs our attention to the ethics of genetically modified crops and foods and the criss-crossing of genetic material that takes place in modern farming techniques and which is being ruthlessly exploited by large multinational companies and corporations.

If there is one underlying theme that resonates throughout the diverse, interrelated and crucial issues our various contributors broach it is this: God gave us this incredibly complex world of bio-diversity we inhabit that forms our natural environment as much for our protection as for our enjoyment. When one dominant species threatens the right of other life forms to exist upon this fragile planet, then we usurp our role as preservers and stewards of God’s good creation and become instead profligate abusers who will eventually be the hapless victims of our own greed and selfishness. That is why the contribution of a biblically informed creation theology to the ongoing ecological and environmental debate could not be more timely and appropriate. ■