

THEOLOGIES OF THE ENVIRONMENT

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THIS ARTICLE IS DESIGNED TO BE A BASIC INTRODUCTION TO POSSIBLE THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS NOW FACING OUR WORLD.

Although, arguably, most current theological responses would fit somewhere in the spectrum outlined, I have not attempted to be exhaustive or to do justice to the subtlety of the theologians and philosophers working in this area. Instead, I have tried to reduce each position to its most basic and crude shape, so as to introduce the concepts to people who are only just starting to think theologically about the environment. Each of the three approaches outlined could have many variants. Each is based on a real desire to see how believing in God as creator affects our approach to creation.

GOD IS IN CONTROL

This first set of theological responses starts from a belief in the omnipotence of God. He gave the world a beginning, and it will end only when God pleases. There is much in the Jewish and Christian scriptures that would support such an approach.

(1) In Genesis 1.28 God says to humankind, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'¹ Human beings express God's creatorly control over the world, and should feel no embarrassment about doing so. That is what the earth is for.

(2) The physical world is intended to be transient. It will be destroyed by God: 'Heaven and earth will pass away' (Mk 13.31); 'But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed' (2 Pet 3.10); 'Then I saw a new heaven and a new hearth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more' (Rev 21.1). The earth is not intended to last, so it is futile to pour all our energies into preserving something that will be destroyed in God's good time.

(3) Christians will not have to suffer the terrible fate of living through the times in which the earth is dying. Jesus will come and take all Christians from the Earth into heaven: 'They will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" ... he will ... gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven' (Mk 13.27); 'Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left' (Mt 24.40–41). It must be said that this understanding

seems to be based on an ahistorical misreading of the texts quoted.

(4) God can make more worlds. He made this one, with all its many resources, and he can do it again. 'The Christian knows that the potential in God is unlimited and that there is no shortage of resources in God's Earth. The secular or socialist has a limited resource mentality and views the world as a pie ... that needs to be cut up so everyone can get a piece.'² Our job is to fulfil the creation mandate, which is to subdue the Earth and have dominion over it, and leave the rest to God.

(5) These might be considered to be conservative evangelical approaches, based on very particular readings of the biblical texts, but there is also a quite widespread theological opinion, which is not confined to one theological tradition, which says that 'green' theologies of various kinds are not Christian. The argument is that the Earth is being put at the centre of theology, which the Bible suggests is the place of human beings. There is a kind of pantheism or nature worship in green thinking that is hard to reconcile with Christianity. Patrick Curry writes, 'Disenchanting the world, so that nature and its places and fellow inhabitants can no longer be seen as sacred, *is a fundamental prerequisite to commodifying and exploiting it.*'³ Does it follow that we have to think of the earth as 'sacred' before we can agree with ecological theology? Cardinal Pell of Sydney comments, 'In the past, pagans sacrificed animals and even humans in a vain attempt to placate capricious and cruel gods. Today they demand a reduction in carbon emissions.'⁴

STEWARDSHIP OF CREATION

The second umbrella-group of theological responses to the environment takes its rationale from the creation account of Genesis 2 and 3, rather than Genesis 1.

(1) The second creation story in Genesis 2 says that God takes the new human creature that he has just made and 'put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it' (Gen 2.15). This is followed by a lovely word-picture of the man's relationship with the animals. The man gives names to each creature, perceiving what they are like and naming their individuality.

By the end of Genesis 3, this relationship has been disrupted by human disobedience. God says to the man and the woman 'cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the

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NOTES

1 Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture references are taken from the NRSV.

2 Mark A Beliles and Stephen K McDowell, *America's Providential History* (Charlottesville, VA: Providence Foundation, 1989).

3 Patrick Curry, *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), p. 103.

4 Part of a talk given to businessmen in Sydney, Australia, in 2006. Quoted from the website of the Catholic diocese of Sydney, www.sydney.catholic.org.au/home.shtml.

► plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground out of which you were taken' (Gen 3.17–19). The simple, fruitful relationship of human stewardship of the creation is part of what is forfeited by the choice in the garden.

(2) But that does not mean that the commission to stewardship is lost, only that it becomes harder. The people of God in the Old Testament are given all kinds of regulations that govern their treatment of the world, including the land sabbath and the famous year of Jubilee, when the land was to be allowed to rest from its crop-bearing function. Although it is not clear that this did really happen every seven years or, indeed, at all, the principle enshrined is that nature is not just there to be exploited. It can expect its own needs to be met by human beings.

(3) In Romans 8, Paul explicitly connects the fate of the natural and the human creations: 'For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (vv 19–21). The rediscovery of the proper relationship of stewardship from human creation to natural creation is part of the salvation that we and the world long for, Paul suggests.

Arguably, the miracles of Jesus fit into this context. Jesus does exercise the proper stewardship of the world, and it responds to him as the pre-fallen world did to the first Adam – storms are stilled and diseases are healed.

(4) Although the term 'stewardship' seems to have patronising and paternalistic overtones, it also has the possibility of reminding us about the mutuality and interdependence of human and non-human creation. It also makes it clear that it is part of the purpose of human life to maintain those interdependencies responsibly.

RESURRECTION AND THE PHYSICAL UNIVERSE

The third set of responses is based on the Christian belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the fulfilment of God's original creative purposes.

(1) There are a number of places in Jewish and Christian scriptures where it is envisaged that God will have no further use for this world at the second coming. However, this world will be transformed, recognisable: 'I am about to create a new heaven and a new earth ... They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit' (Is 65.17–21). The

whole description of this 'new heaven and earth' is based on our own heaven and earth, but with the pain, toil and suffering removed, and the proper relationship of mutual care between earth and its inhabitants reintroduced.

(2) Jesus' resurrection body is a foretaste of what is to be expected for the whole of the physical creation. Romans 8 specifically links the salvation of the children of God with the liberation of the creation from its 'bondage to decay'. The discussion in 1 Corinthians 15.35–49 about the physical reality of resurrection bodies, specifically includes animal and plant life. A new creation is envisaged and it deliberately parallels God's original creation of human beings from the dust: 'Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust [i.e. Adam], we will also bear the image of the man of heaven' (1 Cor 15.49).

(3) In the interim between Jesus' resurrection from the dead and the new creation, the Church is to carry the reality of the resurrection in its own life. It is therefore particularly incumbent upon Christians, perhaps, to live in the world as though it is already a 'new heaven and a new earth', and to treat the human and non-human creation as something that bears in it the seeds of its coming transformation. 'If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself' (2 Cor 5.17–19). The Church is a point of intersection between the past and the coming future of God, both in its community life and in its treatment of the Earth.

These three caricatured sets of theological responses could be endlessly expanded and refined, but the broad outline is enough to show why Christian responses to the current ecological threat have been slow and muddled.

Our response to God's world shows, whether we know it or not, a lot of what we believe about God the creator and redeemer, and what such a God expects from the people who are created to live in the world that God has made. If Christians make no moves to care for creation, perhaps what we are really saying is that we believe that God thinks we are irrelevant? ■