

**Part of the problem, part of the solution:
framing a Christian response to the environmental crisis**

Towards the end of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, one of the characters reflects that she lives 'in a world where even when you were a solution you were a problem'.¹ Such recognition of the often ambiguous nature of humanity's moral condition is fundamental to approaching various ethical dilemmas facing contemporary Christians, but perhaps none more obviously than that of the burgeoning environmental crisis. For however unpalatable the historical record may be, it is now clear that the Christian (or post-Christian) West bears primary responsibility for the circumstances that have led to the destruction and pollution of the natural world. By the same token, it is also clear that notwithstanding the ecological degradations now being committed by non-Christian peoples elsewhere, the traditionally Christian nations of the West retain sufficient international economic and political power to effect major changes in the overall pattern of human environmental practice. Given, then, that western culture forms both part of the current problem of and part of the future solution to this crisis, the starting point for a specifically Christian ethical response must be to reconsider the Church's inherited responsibility in this area.² Of course, not all Christians accept that their religious tradition bears such a responsibility, and even among those who do, there is disagreement as to how far such a responsibility extends and to what extent it should reform their thinking.³ And here it becomes clear that the formulation of a comprehensive Christian response to the crisis is bound up in larger debates within today's Church about its interpretation of scripture, its receptivity to scientific knowledge, and its willingness to cooperate with those of other faiths and none. But it is not only conservative Christians who must entertain radical changes to their thinking and lifestyle. Unless Western Christians as a whole are willing to revise their understanding of the Kingdom of God as both a socio-political reality and an eschatological eventuality, they will remain complicit in the earth's ongoing destruction. Key to this ethical shift must be a willingness to embrace and act upon a more holistic interpretation of Jesus' claim that 'the kingdom of God is among you' (Luke 17.21).

Although it will not be possible in this context to undertake a substantive examination of biblical texts, it is vital to recognize the essential role of scripture in reconfiguring Christian attitudes towards the environment. For despite its potentially revolutionary teachings about the ethical life, the Bible is more often than not employed by contemporary Western Christians as a bulwark with which to resist social change than as a means by which to instigate it. Whether they perceive the Bible as an unwavering source of authoritative moral judgments or as an evolving resource for ethical investigation necessarily affects Christians' ability to discover in it new answers to new questions about how best to behave in the world.⁴ If they fall into the former category, it would appear difficult to persuade them that the interpretations they have inherited may no longer suffice in contending with the shifting facts of life now surrounding them. Yet even those who fall into the latter category may remain enmeshed in unconsciously static attitudes from which their espoused progressivism has yet to free them entirely. An obvious example of where Christians of various persuasions have proved rigid in their interpretation of scripture is Genesis 1.26: 'Then God said,

¹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York, 1987), 256.

² Mission and Public Affairs Council of the Church of England, *Sharing God's Planet: a Christian vision for a sustainable future* (London, 2005), 29.

³ Michael S. Northcott, *The environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge, 1996), 162-3.

⁴ Tom Deidun, 'The Bible and Christian Ethics', in Bernard Hoose (ed.), *Christian Ethics: An Introduction* (London, 1998), 39. See also Rowan Williams, *Anglican Identities* (London, 2004), 77.

"Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth".⁵ Obviously there are Christians who take this passage literally (or almost literally) as a divine endorsement of total human control over the created order and thus a theological basis for approaching the natural world as a passive assemblage of resources to be exploited and consumed.

Yet even among those Christians who perceive the concept of 'dominion' to bring with it responsibility as well as advantage and who are increasingly concerned to emphasize the human obligation of stewardship over mere consumerism, there remains a tendency to treat nature impersonally as something to be manipulated.⁶ So a Christian environmentalist such as Ian Barbour has queried biblically-based arguments for stewardship that do not also promote an attitude of thanksgiving for humans' subordinate place in creation, arguing that without this added dimension Christian thinking may remain rooted in its traditionally 'utilitarian' assumptions.⁷ Others have similarly sought to remind Christians of the Bible's broader, more holistic attitude towards the human role in creation.⁸ Assuming that scripture will continue to serve as a primary source for the formulation of Christian ethical choices in the world, it is imperative that inherited interpretations of certain texts about the natural order not be passed on uncritically and without recognition of their possible inadequacies and presumptions.

Of course, the separatist attitude that Christians tend to exhibit towards the environment does not derive solely from their reading of occasional verses in the Old Testament. Unpacking the variety of ways in which Christian thinking about nature has evolved over the centuries and assessing its role in the modern environmental crisis has preoccupied the western ecology movement since the 1960s. Historian Lynn White's now-famous essay 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis' (1967) is frequently cited as one of the first concerted attempts to identify the impact of Medieval and subsequent Christian thought upon western attitudes towards nature. In his essay, White reasons that the emphasis in Western Christianity upon a doctrine of personal redemption over a doctrine of creation has encouraged a worldview in which nature is separated both from God and from humanity.⁹ While many have subsequently questioned whether Christian ideas are the sole determinant in the emergence of modern western behaviour, the essence of White's argument has been influential among both Christian and non-Christian ecologists.¹⁰ One activist who has been uncompromising in his judgment of the Church as complicit in the twin evil of economic and environmental exploitation is the American writer Wendell Berry, who in his essay 'Christianity and The Survival of Creation' observes:

Christian organizations, to this day, remain largely indifferent to the rape and plunder of the world and of its traditional cultures. It is hardly too much to say that most Christian organizations are as happily indifferent as most industrial organizations to the ecological, cultural, and religious implications of industrial economics. The certified Christian seems just as likely as anyone else to join the military-industrial conspiracy to murder Creation."

Less stringent but nonetheless following essentially the same logic is the recent document produced by the Mission and Public Affairs Council of the Church of England, *Sharing God's Planet* (2005), which identifies the twentieth century as 'a time of tremendous human prodigality, a project of growth without limit.' The

⁵ Celia E. Deane-Drummond, *The Ethics of Nature* (Oxford, 2004) ix.

⁶ Ian Barbour, *Nature, Human Nature and God* (London, 2002), 124.

⁷ See, for example, Walter Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision: Biblical Essay on Shalom* (New York, 1976), 15; and Larry L. Rasmussen, 'Creation, Church, and Christian Responsibility', in Wesley Granberg-Michaelson (ed.), *Tending the Garden: Essays on the Gospel and the Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1987), 116.

⁸ Lynn White, Jr., 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis', in Ian Barbour (ed.), *Western Man and Environmental Ethics* (Reading, MA, 1973): 18-30.

⁹ Ian Barbour, *Nature, Human Nature and God*, 122.

¹⁰ Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community: Eight Essays* (New York, 1994), 94.

text goes on to assert that even if ecological damage were not such an obvious problem, 'for Christians there must be a recognition that the project of growth without limit has to be curtailed', given the harm it has done to so many people, particularly the poor and vulnerable in the developing world.¹¹ This last point highlights an issue that western Christians have been permitted to ignore heretofore: the increasingly global impact of both their public policy and private lifestyle decisions. It is now possible for committed Christians to strive for selflessness in relation to their immediate neighbours and still participate in structures that adversely affect their 'neighbours' on another continent. But however tempting it may be under such circumstances to idealize the traditionally biocentric tendencies of other faiths, sadly these have proven no more effective than modern Christianity in persuading their societies to modify environmental practices.¹² Rather than demonize the Christian tradition for its obvious failure to promote biocentrism in the past, then, a more constructive approach in the present would be to encourage Christians to recognize their interdependency not just with the planet itself but also with all those with whom they share it.¹³ This is a key aspect to what Lynn White forty years ago identified as the process by which Christians 'must rethink and refeel our nature and destiny'.¹⁴

Having recognized that they are the inheritors of scriptural and doctrinal emphases that have inhibited and distorted their conception of the created order and those with whom they share it, Christians must return to their tradition afresh and look for new ways of understanding. At a gathering of Christian environmentalists held at Harvard in 1999, Thomas Berry put it bluntly: 'The basic problem before us is how to recover a sense of a sacred universe.'¹⁵ Since the 1960s, various Christian thinkers have tried to address this problem from an ecological standpoint, resulting in what has been broadly termed the field of 'ecotheology'.¹⁶ Yet perhaps the most compelling work done in this field thus far has been that produced specifically in the name of 'ecofeminism' by theologians such as Lynn Andrews, Rosemary Radford Reuther and Sally McFague. In interrogating the gender implications of the Jewish and Christian traditions, these theologians have in the process emerged with a more holistic vision of humanity's place in creation, of which environmental stewardship comprises a key but by no means isolated component.¹⁷ Environmental degradation is not a dilemma to be addressed separately from matters of human dignity and justice, but rather as directly analogous to and even interwoven among them. Thus, in asking whether Christology can ever be said to assume a specifically ecological form, Sally McFague reasons that traditional prophetic Christology 'is easily extended to nature: nature is the "new poor": nature deserves justice; other life-forms have rights that must be acknowledged; human beings are in a covenantal relationship with God to protect nature even as they should care for other human beings.' In ethical terms, McFague concludes, 'prophetic Christologies provide a firm base for extending *rights* to other life-forms, countering the supposition that sentimental attachment to nature is sufficient.'¹⁸ By the same token, Rosemary Radford Reuther has insisted that 'the Church's mission of redemption of the world cannot be divorced from justice in society or from

¹¹ Mission and Public Affairs Council of the Church of England, *Sharing God's Planet: a Christian vision for a sustainable future* (London, 2005), 15.

¹² R.J. Berry, *God's Book of Works: The Nature and Theology of Nature* (London, 2003), 88-9.

¹³ Gordon D. Kaufman, 'Re-conceiving God and Humanity in Light of Today's Ecological Consciousness: A Brief Statement', in *Cross Currents* 50: 1&2 (Spring/Summer 2000): 68.

¹⁴ Lynn White, Jr., 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis', 30.

¹⁵ Thomas Berry, 'Christianity's Role in the Earth Project', in Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Reuther (eds.), *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans* (Cambridge, MA, 2000): 131.

¹⁶ For an overview of the types of ecotheology, see Michael S. Northcott, *The environment and Christian Ethics*, 124-63.

¹⁷ For an overview of ecofeminism, see R.J. Berry, *God's Book of Works*, 98-103.

¹⁸ Sally McFague, 'An Ecological Christology: Does Christianity Have It?', in Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Reuther (eds.), *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), 29-30.

healing of the wounds of nature wrought by an exploitative human industrial system.¹⁹ What is important about such statements is their attempt to retain the specific language of the Christian tradition while refashioning it to accommodate the realities of the current environmental crisis. As a religion preoccupied with social relationships, Christianity may not be as obviously biocentric as some other faiths, but as McFague and Reuther illustrate, this need not prevent its adherents from attempting a sort of 'ethical extrapolation' based on inherited categories and logic. Or, put another way, following the golden rule and practicing sustainable development may not be such radically different propositions as some might think.²⁰

In formulating a new ethical framework within which Christians might re-conceive their relationship with the natural world and respond appropriately to its degradation, one must not overlook the obstacles that still stand in the way of such change. Not least among these is the hesitancy some mainstream Christians continue to display in extending theological legitimacy to the natural world. This reluctance appears to be motivated by the fear that ecological consciousness may constitute a form of pantheism and therefore run the risk of somehow being unchristian.²¹ It is telling that even in the Church of England document *Sharing God's Planet*, a simple call to appreciate the broader 'human connectedness' to the natural world is immediately contextualized by the assurance that 'this is not a call to earth-worship. It is a recognition of the unbreakable kinship of all God's creatures.'²² While the existence of such scruples among certain Christians need not inhibit ecological consciousness among their co-religionists, it would seem wise to recognize the persistence of such anxieties when proposing ethical imperatives within diverse communities. And here again one sees how the environmental crisis highlights larger divisions and differences within the modern Church that cannot be readily isolated from it. There appears to be a fundamental rift operating between those Christians willing to countenance the possibility that the Kingdom of God has imminent socio-political implications for life on earth and those who regard it primarily as an eschatological eventuality intended to resolve matters of personal salvation. Of course, neither of these understandings of the Kingdom of God need be altogether exclusive of the other. Yet those who emphasize the latter tend to encourage a more modest material interpretation of what Jesus meant when he taught his disciples to pray, 'Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven' (Matt. 6.10). If in the process the will of God becomes predominantly a matter of internal, subjective experience, then it becomes clearer how some Christians can remain indifferent to the earth's destruction. In contemplating the morbid tendency of this type of Christianity, Wendell Berry has reflected that 'the significance – and ultimately the quality – of the work we do is determined by our understanding of the story in which we are taking part....It is impossible to see how good work might be accomplished by people who think that our life in this world either signifies nothing or has only a negative significance.'²³ It will be difficult for some Christians ever to respond ethically to the environmental crisis when their faith is predicated upon an implicit hatred of material existence itself.

There are other, more external obstacles facing Christians who wish to respond positively to the current crisis. There is now in place a network of vested interests functioning at the global level whose resistance to environmental reform is formidable and with which all ecologically-minded people must contend. Western governments committed to extending market principles to all aspects of social policy are in active cooperation with trans-national corporations which demonstrate scant regard for the environmental impact of their behaviour upon local communities. In this way, the democratic potential of Christians and others to conserve and manage the natural order they inhabit has gradually been

¹⁹ Rosemary Radford Reuther, 'Conclusion: Eco-Justice at the Center of the Church's Mission', in Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Reuther (eds.), *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), 603.

²⁰ Mission and Public Affairs Council, *Sharing God's Planet*, 30-1.

²¹ R.J. Berry, *God's Book of Works*, 90.

²² Mission and Public Affairs Council, *Sharing God's Planet*, 19.

²³ Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community*, 109-10.

undermined.²⁴ The malign effects of this globalizing process are particularly acute in parts of the developing world, where not only has it served to undermine ecologically appropriate lifestyles but forced nearly a billion people worldwide to degrade their environment simply in order to survive.²⁵ The vicious cycle of national debt in which many of these countries are now caught does nothing to discourage this degradation and sometimes, through the strictures of institutions such as the World Bank, it actively encourages environmental destruction.²⁶ For Western Christians, then, it would seem that a comprehensive ethical response to the crisis must entail not just changes in patterns of personal behaviour but also a willingness to expose and challenge the institutional corruption exacerbating the problem at an international level.²⁷ They must be willing to take Jesus at his word when he announces that 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth' (Matt. 5.5), and to say as much as to the rich and the powerful.²⁸

In sum, then, what is to be done? Much of this essay has been devoted to the idea that for Christians to respond effectively to the current crisis, they must be willing to undertake a process of self-examination, repentance and renewal. A truly ethical position requires this sort of moral transparency and theological flexibility. Yet such a reflective process should not be used as an excuse for doing nothing practical in the present moment. There are many modest but immediate ways in which individual Christians and local church communities can reform their lifestyles to reflect their changing values, and a document like *Sharing God's Planet* is useful in supplying the necessary guidance for such efforts.²⁹ But Christians also have an obligation not just to neutralize the damage they and others are doing to the environment; they also have an ethical responsibility to embody positively what Rosemary Radford Reuther has called 'communities of mutual flourishing'.³⁰ Thus it is difficult to see how they can genuinely address the environmental crisis without simultaneously questioning the basic tenets of late western capitalism. For as Michael Northcott has observed, the existence of the Church itself is undermined by the fragmenting and alienating trends that globalizing modernity has visited upon so many of its members, and the strain of this reality is beginning to show. It may be impossible to undo these trends, but neither need Christians passively to acquiesce in them.³¹ As people who believe in the reality of resurrection, Christians have an opportunity to witness to hope in the face of much that is depressing and frightening about the current situation.³² Part of their ethical response must therefore be not just to prophesy against what is wrong but also to witness to what is positive and healthful in the necessary changes. Of course, there is nothing exclusively Christian about all this, and a recognition that the problem is now global in scope should awaken Christians to the fact its solution also transcends their specific abilities and outlook.³³ But this is part of the larger lesson that the planet has to teach people of all faiths and none, that the beginning of wisdom is to accept, even at this late hour, that in its universal embrace lies the path to the Kingdom of God.

²⁴ Michael S. Northcott, *The environment and Christian Ethics*, 309-13.

²⁵ Michael S. Northcott, 'Ecology and Christian Ethics', in Robin Gill (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics* (Cambridge, 2001), 211.

²⁶ Seán McDonagh, *Greening the Christian Millennium* (Dublin, 1999), 39. See also Peter Selby, *Grace and Mortgage: The Language of Faith and the Debt of the World* (London, 1997), esp. 73-93.

²⁷ Peter G. Brown, 'An Economics for Spaceship Earth: A time for witness - A Time for Service', in *Quaker Eco-Bulletin* 4:2 (March-April 2004): 4.

²⁸ Gordon Zerbe, 'Ecology According to the New Testament', in *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum* 21:2 (Fall 1992): 20.

²⁹ Mission and Public Affairs Council, *Sharing God's Planet*, 34.

³⁰ Rosemary Radford Reuther, 'Ecofeminism: The Challenge to Theology', in Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Reuther (eds.), *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), 110.

³¹ Michael S. Northcott, *The environment and Christian Ethics*, 319, 326.

³² Sally McFague, 'An Ecological Christology: Does Christianity Have It?', 43.

³³ Martin W. Holdgate, *From Care to Action: Making a Sustainable World* (London, 1996), 145.

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