

## Faith and the Environment

### *Abstract*

*Whilst some environmentalists have suggested that Christianity has endorsed those attitudes and actions that have led to the current environmental crisis, this is not the whole story. Until the Enlightenment, Christianity embraced the notion of humankind "having dominion over creation" whilst being under the ultimate "sovereignty of God". It was only with that development that the link was severed such that "dominion" could be misconstrued as "domination".*

*More recently, the original sense of humankind's relationship with creation as steward, trustee and companion has been re-emphasised. This is evidenced by groups such as Christian Ecology Link and Eco-Congregations. Similarly, individual dioceses within the Church of England have their own environmental policies under the umbrella title "Shrinking the Footprint".*

In a 1967 issue of "Science", Professor Lynn White laid a startling accusation at the door of Christianity: "Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. In absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions, it not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends". A generation later, Jonathan Porritt would say: "We shall continue to see a worsening ecological crisis until we reject that central Christian axiom that nature has no reason but to serve man".

But is this judgement of Christianity true? It was not until the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century with its emphasis on reason as sole source of authority that the inherited Christian idea of human dominion over creation became separated from the concept of God's ultimate sovereignty which had acted to restrain the excesses of human activity. It was only when this link was severed that the way was open to exploit not only the environment but also people themselves. Dominion has not always led to domination!

The 1988 Church of Scotland report (*While Earth Endures*), amplified in the 1990 Church of England report (*Faith in the Countryside*), remind us of the roles of humankind as stewards, trustees, and companions. Thus prompted, awareness of a more wholesome relationship of human beings to the non-human world continues to grow with much Christian input into ecological/environmental issues.

With reference to the above....

- A **Steward** is someone with a sense of responsibility for the power that he/she has within their hands. Jesus used stories to distinguish between good and bad stewards.
- A **Trustee** is someone with a sense of holding something in trust for others. It is a responsibility held on behalf of others who expect that such a person would

strive to maintain whatever is held in trust in good order. Once again Jesus distinguishes between those who maintain, or improve, the owner's property and those who leave it to deteriorate.

- A **Companion** is someone who is aware of the interdependence of the different aspects of the created order; such awareness would not countenance exploitation of one aspect over another. Jesus used the example of the simple beauty of the flowers in the fields to indicate a proper perspective on life.

The exploitative paradigm, reinforced by Thatcherite policies (*the famous quote: "There is no such thing as society only individuals and their families"*), is now being superseded by one which emphasises the unity of all creation. Hopefully, this is not too late to inform us as we face the ravages of our own self-inflicted climate change.

This new approach is exemplified by organisations such as Christian Ecology Link and Eco-Congregation.

Eco-Congregation has an Award scheme designed to:

- affirm the good environmental work of churches
- witness to the wider world that churches care for God's creation

The Award is given to churches that have:

- undertaken an environmental check-up or audit
- undertaken activities or initiatives in each of the following three areas:
  1. **'spiritual'**: worship and teaching — linking environmental issues with the Christian faith e.g. through services, children's work or an adult homegroup
  2. **practical**: practising what is preached e.g. an energy, churchyard or recycling project
  3. **mission**: reaching out — worked with or through their local community on environmental issues e.g. a litter pick, project with a school or other community group, gaining positive publicity

The Church of England has its own "Shrinking the Footprint" campaign. A report commissioned by the C of E shows that by ensuring energy is used efficiently in cathedrals and church buildings the Church of England could reduce its footprint by as much as 12% or almost 27,000 tCO<sub>2</sub>e.

Chelmsford Cathedral, who became the first English Cathedral to receive an eco-congregation award this year, has taken on the challenge of encouraging very church in their diocese to follow their example.

My own Diocese of York only last Saturday committed itself to developing its own environmental policy and declared 2011 to be its Year of the Environment.

A more local initiative is provided by a group within the Diocese of Sheffield...it's called Plan 2050 - Election 2010. It's a national campaign demanding that our political parties produce energy policies that add up in time for the general election. It seeks a commitment to specific targets rather than general principles. The leader of that group is Revd Michael Bayley, who is present with us and has a display in the delegates' area.

In conclusion, Ian Bradley ("God is Green") tells us that: "in order to proclaim the greenness of Christianity we do not need any new doctrines or new theology. We need to return with a new eye and a new attention to the Scriptures".

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