

ECO-MISSION: AN INTER-FAITH APPROACH

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Introduction

In recent years environmental issues have become a much-discussed topic in the community at large as well as in the media and the political arena. There is of course good reason for this to be so. Enviro-sceptics still exist, but there is arguably a broad consensus that the Earth is in trouble, and that something needs to be done sooner rather than later. If the 2009 climate conference in Copenhagen demonstrated how difficult it is for politicians to find sustainable ways forward into the future, it is also true that none of us have found it an easy matter to deal with. A start has been made, but much more needs to be done.

Starting Point

Where should we start? The term “eco-crisis” may seem to be an accurate enough description of an increasingly obvious global reality. On closer examination, however, it will appear to be a term that is seriously limiting in its grasp. As James Nash¹ says, to talk of the “environmental problem” is rather like referring to a nuclear conflagration as a fire. His assertion that it is not “a single, discrete problem, but rather a massive mosaic of intertwined problems” adversely affecting all life is demonstrably correct. Those problems have been well documented elsewhere and it is not necessary to repeat that here.

It is true that some scientists disagree about what is happening, for example about climate change; however, it is also true that climate scientists are almost unanimous in their view of the current situation, its causes, and the future outlook. It is also true that climate science in particular is an important partner in this on-going saga. From my perspective it is very clear that the serious environmental degradation of our time has a largely human cause; but I would argue that the case for environmental care, or as I would prefer to say, the care of creation, does not ultimately depend on a crisis, however caused. Rather, it depends on our undergirding theology, and I want to begin at that point.

Theology

Paul Santmire² has demonstrated that Christian attitudes to the natural world throughout history have been marked by ambiguity, but that Earth-

¹ James Nash 1991. *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility*. Nashville: Abingdon.

² H Paul Santmire. 1985. *The Travail of Nature - the Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

friendly positions go right back to the beginning of the Church. The Orthodox scholar Elizabeth Theokritoff³ also provides details about early saints who were deeply immersed in the Earth as God's creation. Thus, the Church's task is not so much to re-invent itself as it is to reclaim a position that was there from the beginning; the human focus is not the only or most significant word.

In many ways the title of Denis Edwards' fine book⁴ *Ecology at the Heart of Faith: the change of heart that leads to a new way of living on earth* says it all. Ecology is at the heart of faith, and some of the most significant Christian doctrines are involved. For example, Migliore refers to a new interest in the doctrine of creation, and the reason is located in the environmental crisis. As he states, "... every exposition of the doctrine of God as creator and of the world as God's good creation is profoundly challenged by the ecological crisis"⁵.

But we can go on to talk about the nature of the triune God, and the centrality of the Incarnation for Christian faith. The Word became flesh, John tells us. The divine Word became one "of the Earth", like us. This is in stark contrast to remnants of ancient dualistic philosophies that are still prevalent in some circles.

It is clear that the grace of God is bound to emerge as a crucial insight if we are to understand God, ourselves, and our place on Earth. Jenkins' phrase is "ecologies of grace", and it demonstrates how grace is an undergirding element in the whole discussion of the way faith relates to the Earth. James Nash makes a useful contribution to the debate when he declares that "The logic of the doctrine of creation does not permit a nature-grace dichotomy"⁶. He shows himself as a disciple of Sittler as he goes on to assert:

Grace is not only the forgiveness of sins but the 'givenness' of life, both redemption and creation – 'a double gratuity'. The whole of nature – the biophysical universe – is not the antithesis of grace, but rather an expression of grace...

³ Elizabeth Theokritoff. 2009. *Living in God's Creation: Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology*. New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press.

⁴ Denis Edwards.

⁵ Daniel L Migliore. 2004. *Faith Seeking Understanding: an introduction to Christian Theology* (2nd ed). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

⁶ James Nash. *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 95.

Perhaps more than anyone else in his time, Sittler viewed the whole of creation as an expression of grace. He asks, “Is it again possible to fashion a theology catholic enough to affirm redemption’s force enfolding nature, as we have affirmed redemption’s force enfolding history?”⁷

Then too there are sections of the creation stories that speak to us. Consider for example Genesis 1:28 in which God commanded humans to “have dominion” over other life. But dominion is not the same as domination; in any event, verse 27 provides the context. Humans are made in the image of God, and that is exemplified in the self-giving care of Jesus. Genesis 2:15 calls on humans “to till (the garden) and keep it”, or in other words, to care for God’s creation.

Recent decades have produced a very large volume of literature on eco-theology and its implications. In broad terms what that means is that care of the Earth as God’s creation builds upon the most basic and fundamental theology of the Christian faith. That has been a great step forward, but often enough the problem has been that it has remained largely in the area of generalities, and has not been expressed in practical terms of specific situations and jurisdictions. There are various ways in which that needs to be explored, but the particular purpose of this paper is to explore an interfaith approach to eco-mission and to suggest that this is an area rich in potential.

Interfaith Context

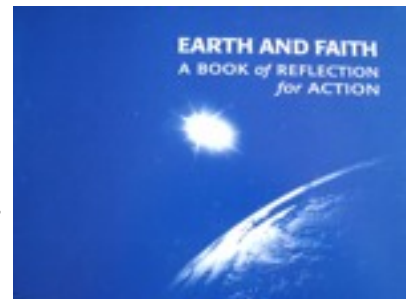
If the potential is significant in Christian terms, it may be even greater when viewed in interfaith terms. Some decades ago when I was heavily involved in the ecumenical movement, it was common for the Greek word *oikoumene*, on which the word “ecumenical” is based, to be defined as relating to the whole inhabited world. In common usage it tends to have a far more restricted meaning, but that original meaning was important in that it was always a challenge to expand our horizon. That challenge is still apt, especially in today’s world when our perspective is often so limited.

I want to suggest that there are a number of factors that offer a powerful incentive to explore a more ambitious goal. The first is that in many of the world’s religions today, including Christianity, there is a minority who hold what could only be described as extreme and intolerant positions with the effect of driving deep divisions between people, groups, nations, and often within nations. The painful and often dangerous outcome of this development is all too obvious.

⁷ Joseph Sittler. Steven Bouma-Prediger and Peter Bakken, Eds. 2000. *Evocations of Grace: The Writings of Joseph Sittler on Ecology, Theology, and Ethics*. (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: WB Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 44.

The second factor is also a global one in every sense, and that is the pain of planet Earth. Again, it is not my purpose here to elaborate on that point; as I have suggested, the effects of climate change and non-sustainable ways of living are increasingly obvious, but inevitably they have their greatest impact on the poorest people who have had little input into the cause of the problem and who are least able to respond to it. But more than that, non-human life also has intrinsic value with its inclusion in the Rainbow Covenant of Genesis 9, and has no response capacity at all. But we are all in this together as part of what has been called “the web of life”, and we with all life are bound to suffer with a groaning Earth.

The third factor is crucial. Just as Christian environmental Statements express fundamental agreement across virtually all confessional positions and divisions, so there is broad agreement among world faiths. In the year 2000 the United Nations Interfaith Partnership for the Environment published a book called *Earth and Faith: A Book of Reflection for Action*. As the Director of the UNEP explained, this was the result of an effort “to continue the dialogue between the scientific and faith communities” from which, it is hoped, will emerge “a greater commitment to taking responsible actions for the protection of our environment for our common good.”⁸



There are two issues in that. The first is a positive partnership between faith and science, and I could say a lot about that, especially in the area of ecological issues and challenges. I feel sure that Moltmann’s Christian perspective might be shared by many people of other Faiths: “The sciences have shown us how to understand creation as nature. Now theology must show science how nature is to be understood as creation.”⁹ In brief, the interface of faith and science represents an important and fruitful partnership. Through ecologists and others, science has been playing a truly prophetic role for a number of years now. It has alerted us to what we are doing to the environment, and what the consequences will be if we keep living in an unsustainable way. Faith and spirituality for its part touches deeper levels of purpose and belonging. We clearly need the contribution of both.

The second issue rising out of the UN book is the way in which the major world faiths converge in their attitude to environmental care, in spite of the

⁸ Libby Bassett, ed. 2000. *Earth and Faith: a book of reflection for action*. New York: The United Nations Environment Programme

⁹ J. Moltmann. 1985. *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*. London: SCM Press Ltd, p38.

differences between world faiths in other areas or the environmental negatives that have emanated from religious sources from time to time. Authorised representatives from the Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu, Christian and other faiths each wrote a short first-hand account of their Faith's teaching on environmental care, and the result is striking; in real terms they are in remarkable agreement on this issue, as they all enjoin their followers to a response of care.

The clear outcome of this convergence of belief is that, as the Edinburgh 2010 Conference affirmed, the care of the planet may be a rich area not only for fruitful interfaith dialogue but also for common action. The Director of the UNEP Adrian Amin wrote that "We ... view the convergence of spiritual values and their respect for the environment as an inspiration for environmental actions today so that our succeeding generations may all be beneficiaries of a healthy planet and a development that is sustainable"¹⁰.

Some Examples

It is not difficult to find some recent examples of the kind of collaboration I am advocating.

First, in the last two years we have witnessed the formation of a new national body known as the ARRCC, or Australian Religious Response to Climate Change, has given practical expression to the UNEP's hope. This is described as "a multi-faith network taking action on the most pressing issue of our time." The website affirms that "In the face of ecological damage and social injustices, we affirm our love for this planet and its inhabitants and our deep reverence for life."

Second, in 2010, the International Year for Biodiversity, I was personally involved interfaith panel for World Environment Day at the University of the Sunshine Coast. The panel consisted of an Islamic scholar, a Jewish Rabbi, a Buddhist Environmental Educator, and me, together with a trained moderator. As the panel members discussed the topic, with each reflecting on it from their own faith perspective, the high level of agreement was obvious to everyone in the auditorium. I believe that made a profound impression.



Third, another event in 2010 was at Southern Cross Care, a Catholic Aged Care Facility at Caloundra, where a public service was held to pray for peace and reconciliation. At least two things stood out for me. The first

¹⁰ Earth and Faith, p4.

was the obvious point that many of the people attending were aged, but no less committed to the ideal for all that. The second was that speakers from the Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, and Christian traditions all spoke, and as was the case at the University of the Sunshine Coast, although coming out of differing traditions, they all said essentially the same thing. The spirit of goodwill and the desire for peace and reconciliation was heart-warming.

The fourth experience was a public lecture on “Islam, Justice, and Compassion” by Imam Afroz Ali at the University of Queensland in October 2009. Afroz Ali is Founder and president of the Al-Ghazzali Centre for Islamic Sciences and Human Development which runs Muslim and interfaith educational, philanthropic, social justice and environmental programs in Sydney and Samoa. He advocates peace, acceptance, justice and inter-personal rights and is involved in the international organisation, “Charter for Compassion”. His lecture focussed primarily on the Centre’s environmental work in Sydney, and included slides of the work being carried out by groups of people. My Christian spirit resonated with his approach, and led to a hope that it is a work we could share.

A fifth factor is the formation in 2012 of the Queensland Churches Environmental Network as a Task Group of Qld Churches Together, and this promises to be a very representative group. Listed among the terms of Reference is this clause: “To explore interfaith possibilities in Earthcare.” Even if it is several years before this translates into significant action, the statement of intent is important. This has national implications in that QCEN will relate to the NCCA Eco-Mission Project, while any initiative by a member Church will also contribute to the overall goal.

Sometimes our spiritual and religious outlook is too restricted. Sometimes our world view is too limited. Sometimes an innate suspicion of anyone who is “different” from us obscures a more fruitful way forward. The Earth – our home – is in need of a mission dedicated to its wellbeing, and it is precisely that need which presents us not only with a profound challenge, but also with a great opportunity to see each other, and the faith traditions we represent, in a new light. There could surely be no better way to break down barriers and build bridges than to focus on the bigger picture of the planet. Moreover, the UN book suggests that:

The spiritual challenge of the ecological crisis draws us back to our religious traditions, to reflect on and celebrate the natural world in its most profound sense of mystery as a manifestation and experience of the sacred.¹¹

A Proposal

¹¹ Earth and Faith, p7.

However we may interpret the deepest levels of meaning, of life and faith, we are all of the Earth; this one fragile planet is our home. From the differing perspectives of our several Faiths, we each have something to offer. My proposal for an interfaith approach to Eco-Mission or Earthcare may therefore be carried forward in a number of stages.

The first step may be to engage in a search for any practical interfaith environmental projects currently operating anywhere in the world.

The second step may be to plan an interfaith “summit” or forum, which might have two main goals. First, it would be to rehearse the position our various Faiths hold on Earthcare in order to ensure that we are all starting at the same place. Second, it would be to explore our openness to practical action together, beginning with a targeted trial project.

The third step would be to find the ways and means to set up and manage the trial project. From that point the way ahead would start to become clear.

There are a number of different ways in which interfaith dialogue may be undertaken fruitfully, but I can think of no better way than a practical and open-hearted approach to working together to care for the Earth. You might note that I am not talking about talking; the time has come in this area of concern not only to “talk the talk”, but even to “walk the talk”!

If this could be made to work I am quite sure that it would make a great impression in the whole community. Indeed, in an important sense a religious response has the capacity to unite world Faiths in a broad coalition of concern with many positive spin-offs.

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