Ambiguity

There appears to be a perception in some circles that Christianity, or indeed religion in general, has nothing significant to say about environmental care or issues relating to the changing climate, and it has to be said in all honesty that such an impression is not altogether without foundation. An objective study of Christianity over the centuries would reveal a significant bias towards human concerns, sometimes with an “other-worldly” emphasis. Moreover, as Santmire argues, some theological writers themselves believe that Christian theology never has had, nor should it have, a substantive ecological dimension\(^1\). However, the truth is rarely as straightforward as that, and I will be seeking to demonstrate that Christianity is increasingly vocal about the need for responsible care of the natural environment.

Santmire goes on to describe the theological tradition of the West over the millennia in terms of ambiguity; it “is neither ecologically bankrupt ... nor replete with immediately accessible, albeit long forgotten, ecological riches hidden everywhere in its deeper vaults”\(^2\). The ambiguity, he suggests, has been expressed in two quite different trends. One is the notion of the human spirit rising above the mundane level of life in order to commune with God, and the other is to envisage human life as much more embedded in the natural world, and finding God’s presence very much within the biosphere.

My purpose here is to look at some of the ways in which Christian Faith has found both God and responsible care in the natural world, and to try to sketch at least the broad parameters of this response. Christian responses to climate change are of course part of a broader response to environmental concerns generally, and come at all levels of Church life, and in both theoretical and practical forms.

World Faiths

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. In

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2000, the Interfaith Partnership for the Environment in cooperation with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) published a volume called *Earth and Faith*, in which the environmental insights of many of the world’s religions were summarised. The clear outcome of this exercise is that while those various religions may have major differences in other areas of belief and practice, in this regard they have a very similar approach, and the care of the planet may be a rich area not only for fruitful 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”³.

More recently, 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, while as recently as one month ago at the University of the Sunshine Coast I was personally involved in an interfaith panel that discussed this topic, and the high level of agreement was obvious.

**A Significant Christian Response**

In more specific Christian terms however, there is now an enormous volume of scholarly literature on ecotheology, or that branch of theology dealing with ecological matters and environmental care. This has been escalating in recent decades and is showing no signs of slowing. It is obviously not possible to go into detail here concerning that literature; suffice it to say that most of it would almost take it as a “given” that Christianity has a role to play in this crucial matter. But the convergence of religion and science on this issue is also a factor, and a number of prominent ecotheologians are also scientists.

An example of the seriousness with which it is regarded is the planning under way for a World Symposium in August 2012 on “Christian Faith and the Earth” being organised by Associate Professor Ernst Conradie in South Africa, which is designed to assess the current state of the debate. Scholars from around the world are engaged in preparing material on many aspects of the issue; my own role in this, together with a colleague, has been to prepare a substantial paper on “the nature, mission, and governance of the Church”

³ UNEP, 2000, p4
as it relates to environmental care. I hardly need to add that the people involved in the 2012 project are drawn from a wide range of denominational and confessional perspectives, from Evangelical to Orthodox, and everything in between.

**A Global Perspective**

More generally, the World Council of Churches has had a significant role through its unit, Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation, and through a range of books, pronouncements and publications has added its voice of concern. But one example may serve to highlight both the possibilities and limitations of action at this level. The WCC participated in the Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and later in that year published *Redeeming the Creation*. Clearly the book contains useful reflections on the Summit and other valuable insights, including a Letter to the Churches. Council delegates wrote, as they said, “with a sense of urgency”. Their words are stark: “The earth is in peril. Our only home is in plain jeopardy. We are at the precipice of self-destruction. For the very first time in the history of creation, certain life support systems of the planet are being destroyed by human actions”\(^4\). Later in the letter they stated, “You will understand why our hearts are heavy and why it is extremely urgent that we as churches make strong and permanent spiritual, moral and material commitments to the emergence of new models of society, based in deepest gratitude to God for the gift of life and in respect for the whole of God’s creation”\(^5\).

The impact of such a considered and impassioned plea should have reverberated around churches all over the world, but it is doubtful if many even knew of the Letter’s existence, and still less, read it and acted upon it. But a similar call to action from within the same ecumenical family came from the United States, where the National Council of Churches convened a conference in 2005. This resulted in an Open Letter to Church and Society in the United States, entitled *God’s Earth is Sacred*. Again, it is a considered statement, and contains crucial insights relating to ecological theology and mission. The “Call to Action” is based on a strong foundation that I would contend has implications for eco-mission in and through the Church generally. It begins with the confession that for too long Christians have pushed the care of the Earth to the periphery of their agenda. It continues:


\(^5\) Ibid p71
This is not a competing ‘program alternative’, one ‘issue’ among many.
In this most critical moment in Earth’s history, we are convinced that the central moral imperative of our time is care for Earth as God’s creation. We believe that caring for creation must undergird, and be entwined with, all other dimensions of our churches’ ministries. We are convinced that it is no longer acceptable to claim to be ‘church’ while continuing to perpetuate, or even permit, the abuse of Earth as God’s creation.”

It is noteworthy that the Statement was signed by some of the most prominent ecotheologians of recent times; while it is directed to American Christians, its significance is in reality universal.

An “Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation” was formulated in 1994 by the Evangelical Environmental Network in the United States, and while it reflects a different theological orientation, its content is broadly similar to other such statements. This Declaration acknowledges the degradation of creation, and lists land degradation, deforestation, species extinction, water degradation, global toxification, the alteration of atmosphere, and human and cultural degradation as particular issues. It then sets out four spiritual responses involving both attitudes and actions. “The earthly result of human sin,” it declares, “has been a perverted stewardship, a patchwork of garden and wasteland in which the waste is increasing...” The call to action includes the following: “We call upon Christians to listen to and work with all those who are concerned about the healing of creation, with an eagerness both to learn from them and also to share with them our conviction that the God whom all people sense in creation (Acts 17:27) is known fully only in the Word made flesh in Christ the living God who made and sustains all things.”

There are other such documents and websites of course, such as the American-based Lutheran Earthkeeping Network of the Synods (LENS), and while some may want to change the occasional word, phrase, or even emphasis, the most significant point to emerge is the degree of unanimity

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6 U.S. National Council of Churches, 2005
8 Ibid p20
9 Ibid pp21-22
from across the theological spectrum. Such a consensus at a world level provides a significant backdrop for national declarations in Australia.

**Australian Responses**

In 2006 the National Council of Churches in Australia issued a statement entitled “Sustaining Creation” that was addressed to the governments in Australia. This raised a number of basic political and economic issues, while being moral and spiritual in nature. The strength of the Statement is in its recognition of the importance of environmental issues; its weakness lies in the fact that while it acknowledges that “we will do all in our power through the Churches” to act in ways that will assist in the achievement of its listed environmental goals, it is primarily a Statement about what governments should do.

By and large, Catholic Churches are not well represented in the ranks of emerging eco-congregations, but in 2002 the Australia Catholic Bishops’ Conference formed Catholic Earthcare Australia (CEA), which is headed by Bishop Toohey. This body’s mandate is to advise the Bishops on ecological matters, to develop national networks, undertake initiatives, and provide educational resources. Its website provides examples of resources and encouragement to engage in eco-mission in pursuit of the vision of ecological conversion enunciated by Pope John Paul II. Bishop Toohey told a Vatican-sponsored conference on climate change in 2007 that climate change provided an opportunity to reconcile religion and science, an issue that for many of us was resolved long ago. However, he had to acknowledge internal opposition to the Church’s involvement in the climate change issue, and such a divided voice invariably weakens the efforts of the Church as a whole.

In denominational terms, a more unequivocal response appears to have come from the Anglican and Uniting Churches, at least through their appointed leaders and official statements. The Anglican Church has developed what it calls the “Five Marks of Mission”, the 5th of which is “to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth”, and that clearly informs the approach of the Anglican Church at a national level. A Report entitled “Green by Grace” was prepared for the 2004 General Synod in Australia, and consciously built on the Anglican Communion’s “Five Marks of Mission”. This short but thoughtful paper includes the following: “Recognising that God sustains and saves all
creation, and appoints people as stewards, we can honour God only if we act with care and respect not only for other people but for all the earth”.

The Australian Anglican Environmental Network website states hopefully, and I believe correctly, that “increasingly the Church is embracing the care of the environment and creation as an essential part of Christian faith, mission and outreach.” Such a claim is given substance by the “Protection of the Environment Canon 2007” passed by the General Synod in October 2007. In brief, the Canon aims at reducing the environmental footprint of a Diocese and increasing environmental sustainability, giving leadership in care of the environment, as well as undertaking an educative role in the responsible care of God’s creation. Importantly, once individual dioceses have adopted the Canon, they are thereby committed to report to the General Synod on targets and progress.

At its inaugural national Assembly in June 1977, the Uniting Church in Australia determined that an environmental concern should be enshrined in the Basis of Union itself, thus providing the foundation for an on-going commitment. Moreover, the sixth Assembly in 1991 passed what amounts to a Bill of Rights – namely, “The Rights of Nature and the Rights of Future Generations”. It affirms “the inalienable dignity of all humans”, and therefore calls for a guarantee of human rights, but extends that to a responsibility for future generations as well as for nature as God’s creation. “We call upon the churches to make room for God’s covenant with creation within the realm of law by committing themselves at all levels to recognition of the following ‘Rights of Future Generations’ and ‘Rights of Nature’”10.

The 2006 Assembly adopted a statement entitled “For the Sake of the Planet and all its People” relating to climate change. In brief, this was a call for Church members and congregations to minimise greenhouse emissions and to advocate for governments “to implement policies that significantly reduce our dependence on fossil fuels and increase our use of non-nuclear renewable energy sources.” The paper itself covers a range of material, but the cornerstone of its approach is arguably the following affirmation: “The Uniting Church’s commitment to the environment arises out of the Christian belief that God, as the Creator of the universe, calls us into a special

10 Sixth Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, 1991
relationship with the creation – a relationship of mutuality and interdependence which seeks the reconciliation of all creation with God”

Regional Responses
Responses at a regional level naturally reflect differing emphases, but in many cases these efforts begin to relate more strongly to local endeavours. Many Anglican Dioceses have an Environmental Commission, and in the case of Canberra-Goulbourn, for example, it reflects an effective diversity of skills and life experience. Its fundamental aim is to encourage the care of creation in both the Church and the community, and to provide support through information and advocacy. One of the more effective regional groups is Angligreen, which is based here in Brisbane.

Most Uniting Church Synods have a Green Church Program of some kind, even if it is largely staffed by volunteers, as it is here in Queensland. One of the more effective is based in Victoria, where among other things a national Award Scheme has been developed. This office has also acted on behalf of the Church nationally in developing a resource for World Environment Day.

Local Responses
But it is at the local level that a Christian response to climate change and the environmental crisis has started to escalate, especially over the past 5 years or so. Many examples could be cited, but I will illustrate the point by reference to my own local Church, Caloundra Uniting on the Sunshine Coast. Together with the Canberra-Goulburn Anglican Diocese, Caloundra Uniting Church has just won a national Climate Award through the ARRCC. In order to achieve this significant recognition that Church had to demonstrate “excellence in taking action and encouraging others.” Several years ago the Church set out to hold an eco-seminar, which in turn led to the development of an eco-mission Vision Statement which was adopted unanimously by the congregation. This provides a direction and a basis for subsequent specific environmental goals. A 4.2 kilowatt solar power system has been installed in the form of a cross, a rather unique feature, and a professional-standard environmental audit was carried out and is being implemented. A start has been made on providing basic environmental education for the congregation and users of the facilities, while a water tank in the context of an environmentally-focussed garden is in the planning

11 Eleventh Assembly, Uniting Church in Australia, 2006
stage. But many other congregations in a variety of places, countries and denominations have also taken steps in a similar direction.

A further aspect of this is the impact it is having on individual members of the congregation; in Caloundra for example an increasing number have become more aware of the issues at stake, and many have installed solar power. In fact Caloundra has twice as many solar power systems as any other postcode in Queensland, although the Church cannot claim sole credit for that.

**Conclusion**

However, I would not want to convey the impression that all is well environmentally in the good ship “Ecclesia”; some good things are happening but there is still that lingering sense of ambiguity that Santmire wrote about. There are significant gaps between the Church’s stated position and effective work on the ground, and between one Christian group and another. The key question I believe is whether we are a “glass half full” or a “glass half empty” kind of person. I could make myself quite depressed by all that is not happening on behalf of the planet, but I prefer to focus on what I regard as an inherent faith-based requirement to act, and to rejoice over the good things that are happening with increasing frequency throughout the country and overseas.

There may be some exceptions, but generally speaking the Christian Church does not have a ghetto mentality; there have been many expressions of a desire to work together with any other concerned group or discipline for the sake of the planet. I submit that in this matter of environmental care, and regardless of our own personal beliefs, there is much to be gained by relating to the deep spiritual dimension in the lives of many people, whether or not that is expressed in organised religion. If the rainbow of hope is to materialise for the planet and all life on it, it will be because we have had a dream of a sustainable future and have committed our best efforts to its fulfilment.

1st June 2010.