Environmental Care and Spirituality

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My name is Clive Ayre, and I am an ordained minister of the Uniting Church. I am also an Adjunct Senior Lecturer in both the Arts and Science Faculties at the University of the Sunshine Coast, with a particular brief to bring to bear a spiritual perspective in the most important area of environmental care. So the issue I want to explore with you today is the link between environmental care and religion or spirituality. Is there a link?

To some folk it may seem like a silly question, and certainly there are some in the Church who might also think so; but I want to suggest that the link is both real and strong. This may not be headline news, but nevertheless there is a huge volume of literature these days exploring all kinds of theoretical and practical aspects of this link, especially so far as the Christian Faith is concerned; so I hope you will forgive me if what I offer today seems sketchy!

In some cases “spirituality” might be defined in a rather broad fashion. I can’t go into detail here, but we could begin by pointing to the nature faiths that some environmentalists, albeit a minority, have embraced. There are forms of goddess spirituality, a focus on Gaia, and so on, each in their own way reaching towards care of the natural environment.

In the short time that we have, I want to focus primarily on what might be termed mainstream Christianity, although I do want to make a few comments about the wider application. An initial point of reference is the Christian belief that the natural environment is God’s creation, and in saying that I must emphasise that I am not talking about the pseudo science of creationism that stands opposed to a notion of some form of evolution.

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.”

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 since it is very close to what I am seeking to encourage at the University. Moltmann reflects a Christian perspective that I share when he wrote, “The
sciences have shown us how to understand creation as nature. Now theology must show science how nature is to be understood as creation.” 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. I can’t go into detail here, nor do I want to downplay either the differences between world faiths or the environmental negatives that have emanated from religious sources from time to time; but it is clear that in real terms the Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu, Christian and other faiths are in remarkable agreement on this issue, as they all enjoin their followers to a response of care.

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.

To my mind, one thing is certain, whether or not one has a personal faith perspective; if taken in its broadest and deepest sense, spirituality is a powerful element in human experience and community. It follows that we can harness the positive power of spirituality for environmental care. My argument is that whatever our religious or spiritual beliefs may be, we share a common humanity; and more than that, we share a place with all living things in what some have called “the web of life.” So we are all involved in the need to care for the only home we have – planet Earth; and we need to use all options open to us. But I want to move on to a more specifically Christian response which reflects my own faith orientation.

There is a widespread assumption that faith is primarily a private matter, and that Christianity is essentially about the world of people. I challenged that assumption in my recently completed PhD research, and argued that from the very beginning, care of the natural environment was intended to be part of the Church’s charter, and that the basis and validity of Christian ecological mission is primarily theological. To be sure, the environmental crisis of our time sharpens the focus of what needs to be done, but the response called forth from Churches and religious communities rises out of the fundamentals of who they are.
It is simply not possible here to do justice to the range of valid responses on offer; the best I can do is to offer several snippets to illustrate my point. For example, critics have argued that the Genesis requirement for humans to “have dominion” and to “fill the earth and subdue it” invites, even requires, an exploitative approach. But the distorted theology that has at times been used to support exploitation is based on a misunderstanding of the nature and meaning of dominion in the Genesis text.

There are several related things here. According to Genesis, humans were made “in the image of God.” What that means will depend on our understanding of God. But one thing is certain; the God who described the creation as “good” does not have hob-nail boots! Put another way, to be made in the image of God is to share in the nature of God, and that is one of creating, nurturing, caring, and renewing. It is reflected in the Genesis text that places humans in the Garden “to till (or serve) it and keep it”.

So this is not a licence to print money; it is not a licence to do whatever meets one’s self-interest. Rather, it means that all people are charged with a God-given responsibility, or if you like, stewardship of the natural environment. When it comes to the practical outworking of that responsibility, I hardly need to tell you that as Churches we have a very long way to go. But let’s focus on the positive, because there is some good news.

At a global level we could point to the contribution of the World Council of Churches; e.g., after participating in the Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the WCC issued a Letter to the Churches, in which 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”. Later in the letter they said that “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”.

Another example is the “Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation” which was formulated in 1994 by the Evangelical Environmental Network in the United States. While it reflects a different theological orientation, its content is broadly similar to other such statements. This Declaration acknowledges and catalogues the degradation of creation, and 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…” It called on Christians to listen to and work
with all those who are concerned about the healing of creation, even as they shared their own convictions.

At a national level, many of the mainstream churches have made strong declarations on this matter. My own Uniting Church has a strong position and commitment to action. The Anglican Church has its “Five Marks of Mission”, the fifth of which is “to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.” There are other such documents and Declarations of course, and while we may want to change the occasional phrase or emphasis, the significant point to emerge is the degree of unanimity from across the theological spectrum. The problem has been in translating those official statements into practical action at the local level, and certainly more education is needed. But I want to make three observations about this.

The first is that in many cases the perceived lack of action at a local level reflects more a lack of leadership with the required skills than a lack of willingness to be involved. Unlike the UK where there is a strong support network, congregations often feel that they are left to their own devices, and they simply don’t know how to proceed.

Second, in spite of difficulties, that situation is starting to change. A regional group like Angligreen in Brisbane is an attempt to provide the necessary support. The Five Leaf Eco-Award scheme has commenced in the Uniting Church in Victoria, with the hope that it will become both ecumenical and national.

Third, more and more congregations around the country are starting to become involved in eco-mission. In some cases it is still early days, but the examples are multiplying, and if time permitted there are stories to be told. As one who is committed to the building of a sustainable future for my grandchildren and their grandchildren, I am encouraged by the number of congregations around Australia that have begun to include environmental care in their mission program – such as Anglican Churches in Stafford, Annerley, and Toowoomba, or Uniting Churches in Caloundra, Maroubra Junction, Northmead, and many, many more. For example, Caloundra Uniting Church adopted an eco-mission statement, and is working on its implementation. An energy audit has been completed. Soon it is hoped a 4kw PV power generating system can be installed. Plans are being made for a garden. There is a list of ideas that will be enough for the next several years at least, and will be monitored by an active social and eco-justice group.
Increasing numbers of Christians are realising the need to establish the credibility of their own personal actions. For example, my wife and I have solar hot water, a PV solar system, insulation, a water tank, and so on. But practical action needs to be undergirded with a form of spirituality that can nurture the soul. I find that in our own native garden, or in visiting a place like Mary Cairncross Park. There is an underlying attitude in all this.

The question is what is the heart or crown of creation? The traditional response would be to assume that humankind occupies that place. Moltmann argues that it is in fact the Sabbath; Celia Deane-Drummond, who is Professor of Theology and the Biological Sciences at Chester University, explains what that means when she suggests that “living from the Sabbath leads to transformation, a transformation of encounter, a renewal of covenant, which we can rightly name as a cosmic covenant….” This is the capacity for renewal at the heart of all life, including the environment. In any event, the Sabbath concept includes the reaffirmation of a sense of covenant between God, humanity, and creation; and for Deane-Drummond it implies a sense of dependence, wonder, and deep joy in creation in all its variety.

Deane-Drummond also urges that we learn to love creation as a gift of God’s love, and that when faith is able to glimpse the glory of God, it leads to a context of love, wonder, humility, and wisdom in which environmental decision-making becomes truly possible. Thus, it is essential to find ways to balance the sense of creation as gift with the competing demands of ecological justice. Such a view leads easily and naturally to forms of creation spirituality, and an appreciation of God, or if you prefer, a spiritual depth in the natural world that quickly translates into creation care.

There is obviously much more that could be said, but hopefully that will at least give you a taste of an environmental response from a religious perspective. If you want to contact me later, you are welcome to take my card. But we may have time for a few questions.

Clive Ayre
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