

God and Nature: A Disciple's Perspective

A Lecture for the Estonian Council of Churches

Tallinn, 11 March 2020

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Towards the end of 2019, the former Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Rowan Williams declared that the environmental crisis is arguably the greatest challenge the human race has ever faced. In this he is in agreement with the present Pope who is clear both that climate change is indeed the greatest threat ever faced – and that it is caused by humans. Whether we wish to argue that latter and particular case, it is difficult, given the weight of scientific evidence and opinion, to deny the seriousness of the environmental crisis does not seem to be a responsible option. Human beings who are integrally part of nature do by reason of their lifestyles and patterns of consumption represent a present danger and threat to the very nature on which they depend. And we are all part of this problem, Greta Thunberg and the proponents of Extinction Rebellion not excluded.

Now it is not part of my task today to reiterate the arguments and the evidence for the position I have immediately struck in my first paragraph. This lies beyond my expertise and, like probably most of us here, I rely on the testimony of others at this point. What does concern me is the tendency in some quarters to blame environmental degradation on historic Christianity. As an influential example of this, in December 1966 Dr Lynn White addressed the American Association for the Advancement of Science in a lecture later published as 'The historical roots of our ecological crisis'. Here he argued that 'the population explosion, the carcinoma of plan-less urbanism, the now geological deposits of sewage' are 'at least partly to be explained . . . as a realisation of the Christian dogma of man's transcendence of, and rightful mastery over nature'. Despite scholarly questioning of its thesis, the lecture soon assumed the status of a sacred text and its argument has been frequently reiterated in scholarly and popular opinion. In its turn this has risked an equal and opposite reaction amongst some Christians operating with the suspicion that there is an anti-Christian bias within much of the environmental lobby today. I want to suggest that none of these accusations or counter-accusations are helpful in arriving at constructive ways forward.

Without a doubt, I have my own prejudices and one of these is instinctively to defend the faith that I represent. And I do discern within much contemporary debate a tendency to overlook the huge benefits that have been bequeathed to us by the Christian heritage of Western civilisation. We operate with these so unconsciously that we fail to grasp how much we owe to them. I also note a lazy tendency in Christianity's cultured and not-so-cultured despisers to blame Christianity for what they consider to be present shortcomings. At the same time neither does it profit us to ignore criticisms of our Christian intellectual heritage on the assumption that we are incapable of being wrong. Indeed, one of the strengths of Christian thought and of the Christian sources of inspiration in Holy Scripture is their ability to assist us in making mid-course corrections when it becomes evident to us that some re-

imagining becomes necessary. So I argue here that one of those necessary re-imaginings concerns our theology of nature, and such a re-imagining can be achieved fully in line with scripture, the best of our traditions and reason. In other words there need be no departure from the heart of our faith but only a fuller realisation of the wisdom that is made known to us in the unfolding revelation of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Inevitably, when Christians reflect upon creation they refer, as I am now doing, to the creation narratives of the Book of Genesis. I understand these chapters to be both theological and doxological in character, offering worship to God our creative source and celebrating the goodness of created existence. These words are theological both in what they exclude and in what they include. They exclude atheism in that they affirm the reality of God. They exclude polytheism in that they attribute creation to one divine source alone. They exclude any ultimate dualism, the attribution of the world we know to an eternally existent conflict between an evil principle and a good principle, because what exists and a derives exclusively from one creator. They deny the eternity of matter because the creation has an origin and a beginning. They deny paganism because sun, moon and stars are lights to mark the way rather than deities to be worshipped. And in time Christians began to speak of a *creatio ex nihilo*, a creation out of nothing rather than a creation out of God's own being, which would render creation itself pantheistically divine, or out of pre-existent matter independent of God's own being. God, the God of Israel, is all in all, the gracious author of a creation that is itself structurally and essentially good. Natural existence in physical bodies embedded in a community of mineral, vegetable and animal realities is a blessing, whatever its risks, and is the setting in which God intends human beings to be and to become.

So, celebration of nature and its essential, structural goodness is a good place to begin. But the reflective believer might soon encounter some difficulties. Supremely, why in such a good creation should there be so much predation, waste and apparent cruelty? True enough these things are set within a context of much peaceful co-existence, co-dependence and co-operation between species. And true enough there is a debate about the level of animal existence at which it can be said that pain and suffering occur. Yet for all species life is a battle for survival, threatened by the possibility of non-existence; and for some higher animals in particular there are evident signs of pain, suffering and even grief. Moreover, struggle appears to be the very mechanism by which creatures become strong and realise their potential, and it evidently involves pain. How do we resolve these challenges within our understanding of the goodness of both God and of creation?

Former generations had a way of resolving this challenge which I consider is no longer open to us. This was the idea that Adam and Eve, the first human creatures, sinned and in the process precipitated the fall of all creatures into a fallen, conflicted condition in which the original peaceful nature of creation was vandalised and the doors open to predation and destruction. So, John Calvin declared that Adam sinned and 'diverted the whole course of heaven and earth'. I suspect that some version of this concept of the fall is still tacitly assumed by some believers. Yet today it would overturn the scientific paradigm that we now almost universally, and in my view certainly correctly, embrace. If truth is to be found both in the book of Scripture and in the book of nature, we should allow that the book of nature

illuminates our interpretation at this point. Since we have thorough knowledge that pain, suffering and predation pre-date the emergence of human beings in the order of things, the old pattern of thought needs revision.

We might find an initial response to this in the language of creation itself. In Genesis 1 creation is conceived as a 'letting-be'. 'Let there be light...', and so on. God calls the basic structures of creation into existence, lets living creatures be within those structures and then lays them under a necessity to 'bring forth' after their own kind, in other words to be 'autopoietic', that is, self-creating or self-realising. God is thus to be thought of more like a parent than an architect or a builder, although care needs to be taken in the use of such an analogy. God creates and 'lets be' as created beings realise their God-given potential. It is beyond contestation that this creative activity has led to an awesome and hugely diverse natural world, a world whose complexity, wonder, beauty and drama we still only partially grasp. Yet creation has its own kind of freedom and freedom once given means the rejection of determinism. Creation in its own development might therefore have its own dark side, what it brings forth may not always be as we imagine it should be, just as was the case in the creation of human beings. We might therefore also propose that in the creation of human beings out of the dust of the earth, that is out of the same elements from which all other sentient life comes forth, the vocation of those human beings was to guide creation in an arguably priestly fashion towards a future fulfilment in which, to adapt another biblical image, the wolf might lie down with the lamb. The tragedy of the human fall is not therefore a fall from a supposed perfection but more in the nature of a failure to rise, to rise to the vocation of stewarding and tending creation in the service of God. In this sense we have indeed diverted the divine intention.

So here we address the question of the place of human beings as the high point within creation. I do not intend here to enumerate the many ways in which human beings show themselves to be distinctive within the created sphere. However, the biblical language that marks human beings out is that of creation in the divine image. Critics denigrate this notion in so far as they believe it undergirds a destructive anthropocentrism that allows human beings the right to claim mastery over other creatures, to exploit them for selfish and self-regarding ends. Paradoxically, the fact that human beings are now accused of destroying the very planet on which they depend and leading it towards extinction is radical testimony to the pivotal place they occupy within the order of things. And yet I deny that the concept of creation within the divine image legitimates such rapacious activity. Properly understood, the divine image in human beings commits human beings to relating to creation in a way that reflects God's creative, providential and life-giving grace. The key is nurture and not mastery, stewardship and not exploitation. It is of the nature of sin that this positive role has been forsaken in a negative lust for greed. And yes, this diverts creation from its movement towards its intended goal. As human beings overflow their proper boundaries so the impact of this is seen as nature overflows its true boundaries and becomes unruly. Perhaps it is something along these lines that Paul intends when he speaks of the way creation has been 'subjected to futility' and now finds itself in bondage to decay (Romans 8:20,21).

Let me however attempt here a change of direction. It is not surprising that in constructing a doctrine of creation we should draw upon materials from the Hebrew scriptures. We should continue to do so. Yet such an approach risks neglecting a truly Christian element without which no doctrine would be adequate. A pointer in the right direction here, and one echoed at a number of points in the New Testament, is Colossians 1:15-16: 'For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him', where the 'him' in question is Christ Jesus our Lord. To my mind the New Testament makes an amazing step when it moves from understanding Christ as saviour and risen Lord to seeing him also as agent in the creation of the universe. Through him, in him and for him all things have been created. This theological shift from Christ as saviour to Christ as agent of creation is made implicitly and explicitly at a number of points in the New Testament. It is clearly to be seen in the great Christological confession that introduces the Gospel of John: 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life' (John 1:1-3). Perhaps we can trace here a similar transition to that made by Israel from seeing Yahweh first as saviour from bondage in the deliverance from Egypt and then from annihilation at the Red Sea to then concluding in time that such a God must also be the creator of the ends of the earth. Perhaps also we can see a development from the creation narrative of Genesis 1 in which Yahweh creates through his Word and the Spirit then broods over the face of the waters. From this Christological and Triune vision of creation I wish therefore to make a number of points.

Our view of nature is Christ-centred and not human-centred. It is for Christ's sake that creation exists not primarily ours. He is the true image of God. Creation is not anthropocentric in orientation but Christocentric. Humans yield place to him and the realities of the natural world past, present and future do not need to be made sense of by how they relate to or contribute to human existence. The natural world has its own place and validity apart from human beings in that it is perceived by and presumably enjoyed by the one through whom and for whom it has been made. Just as in Genesis 1 Yahweh looks upon the work of His own creative activity and sees that it is good, so the Lord looks upon creation through time and proclaims that it is good, it is fit for purpose. So in Hebrews chapter 1, Christ is referred to as the one who is 'appointed heir of all things, through whom (God) also created the worlds' and who even now 'sustains all things by his powerful word' (Hebrews 1:1-3).

A second affirmation is that in Christ the purpose of creation is revealed – and that purpose is that it is destined as a whole for the kind of communion with the Father and so in the life of the Triune God that we see revealed in Christ our Lord. The inherent reason for all of nature is that it will 'be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Romans 8:22). It can rightly be said therefore that Christ is the key that unlocks the mystery of the universe, that in him are 'hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Colossians 2:3). A Wisdom Christology is one that sees the wisdom through whom all things have been created now appearing as the Wisdom of God in incarnation in order that an alienated creation might be restored to full communion with the very ground of its being. Alongside this we may also reckon with the Logos-christology of

John 1, the background to which lies both in the Hebrew notion of the Word of God through which God both speaks and acts, and also the Hellenistic background in Greek philosophy which sees the Logos as the rationality that undergirds created existence and renders it intelligible and purposeful.

Extending from these trains of thought we must deduce as a further affirmation: Christ's life, death, resurrection and glorious reign have universal and cosmic significance, that is, significance for human beings but also for all created reality that lies beyond humankind. If the Word of God through whom all things have come into being now appears in incarnation to redeem, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion (or so it seems to me) that all created realities are impacted by Christ's saving work. To that end, the redeeming work of Christ is to be understood according to the broadest possible scope as the way in which creation is restored to its proper goal. I find it surprising that, generally speaking, little is made of the full implications of incarnation. The Word became flesh, and that must mean not only has the Messiah recapitulated in himself the historical story of Israel – this time successfully - but that he has also recapitulated in himself all levels of life from the mineral and chemical, through the organic and animal to the human, and what is assumed is redeemed. In itself this is a reaffirmation of creation's goodness and an affirmation of God's humility. William Temple, a former Archbishop of Canterbury was therefore right to affirm that Christianity is the most materialistic of all religions. The end and goal of all things is realised in Christ and his saving work in all its particularity becomes universally applicable. This I take to be the meaning of Colossians 1 in which having celebrated the fact that all things visible and invisible were created through him, the hymn rises to the glorious crescendo in v. 20 of affirming that 'through him, God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace *through the blood of his cross*'. It is these last words that to me are the most striking – through the historical and horrific event of the cross that is central to a Christian understanding of human redemption, the writer equally locates the reconciliation to God of 'all things'. And it is hard to imagine what 'all things' possibly excludes.

Now I leave aside what words such as these imply for the question of universal human salvation. That is a discussion for another day and probably another lecturer. What it does not exclude, surely, is the world of nature. Nature shares in the renewal of all things in heaven and on earth. Before God becomes all in all there may indeed be a process of purging, and there are pointers in the New Testament in this direction, yet nature is destined to share in the restoration of all things in the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells. Contrary to apocalyptic and catastrophic visions that have been found in some Christian movements, the ultimate goal of all things that the New Testament offers is a picture of glorious hope, of release from bondage and decay, of healing and renewal and release from suffering. The truth about the universe is ultimately glorious and not tragic.

Creation is from Christ, for him and to him. The 'to him' in this sentence points us to the goal of all things, the *telos* and *eschaton* of God's ultimate purposes. So according to Ephesians 1:9-10 God 'has made known to us the mystery of his will as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth'. These words are variously

translated as 'the summing up of all things in Christ' (NASV), or 'to unite all things in him' (RSV) or 'to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ' (NIV). So, we have clear indication of a restoration of cosmic harmony with Christ as the point of reintegration (Andrew Lincoln). According to Thomas Johnson, 'God plans to redeem, restore, and reunite his entire broken and fragmented cosmos in Christ (Romans 8:18-23), including all beings not just humanity'. So in the biblical drama as understood by Christians, in our end is our beginning, and in our beginning is our end. Christ is the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last (Revelation 22:11). G. C. Berkouwer described this goal as 'the Christological Omega', the final and ultimately reality to which all creation is being inescapably drawn by the Spirit and which will represent the time when God becomes all in all in every way. What a remarkable hope and what a stupendous and, to many, unbelievable claim to make, not least when at the centre of it all is the story of a crucified and suffering human being. But such is the outrageous nature of the Christian faith.

And I want to suggest that there is even more here. According to the vision of Revelation 21:5, the one who is 'seated on the throne' proclaims, 'See I am making all things new'. In the end there will be a work of new creation that will comprehend all things. Yet what is meant by 'all things' here? Does it mean all things that will be in existence at the time of the end, whenever that time will be? Or could it possibly mean 'all things' in the sense of everything that has ever existed, all things that have had being from the creation of the world until its final consummation? There seem to be few grounds on which this latter interpretation can be excluded if 'all things' really means all things. The theologian Jurgen Moltmann is sometimes characterised as engaging in 'theological poetics', but if so, when engaging on this theme his poetics seem to be warranted. He speaks of the God who 'forgets nothing that he has created. Nothing is lost to him. He will restore it all'. He goes on to assert, 'It is the divine tempest of the new creation, which sweeps out of God's future over history's fields of the dead, waking and gathering every last created being. The raising of the dead, the gathering of the victims and the seeking of the lost bring a redemption of the world which no evolution could ever achieve. This redemption therefore comprehends the redemption of evolution itself' (*The Way of Jesus Christ*, p. 303). Moltmann here is envisaging the salvation, restoration and healing not only of all human life, but of all sentient life and of the whole of nature itself. So the omnipotence of God is located not in a kind of 'instant and everywhere control' but in a retroactive mending of every flaw (Fackre). It seems impossible to think any greater thoughts than these.

So as I draw to a conclusion I wish to make a number of points that relate to the title of this essay. I have styled it 'God and Nature: A Disciple's Perspective'. So what about that subtitle. What is the significance of all we have said for disciples of Jesus Christ?

The first thing to say is that if discipleship is about naming Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Word of God, as Lord, and if to be a disciple is to give our supreme loyalty in life to him along with our love and affection, then we are called to love what is his. And all creation is his. He is the one through whom creation has been made and who upholds it with his word of power. In him is life and that life is not only the life of all people but of all creatures. Contrary to any perspective therefore that discounts creation in the purposes of God, that, for instance

regards creation as insignificant when set against the salvation of human souls, God cares about the natural world and has future purposes for it. It should be stewarded and nurtured because it is valuable in itself and because within the community of creation human well-being is intricately bound up with the natural world. As Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical on the environment *Laudato Si* indicates in its sub-title, this world is our 'common home'. It behoves us not to pile it with filth, to pollute its seas with plastics, to deplete and destroy its wildlife, to deplete the fertility of its soils. To be a disciple is to return to our true human vocation of acting in a priestly fashion to be a blessing not a curse to Christ's world.

Secondly, to affirm that the eternal Logos and Wisdom of God from which creation derives has appeared in the person of the Jesus whom we follow, is to sanctify every effort we make to enter reverently into creation's mysteries, to be in harmony with its underlying rhythms and dynamics. When in Eden Yahweh asked Adam to name the animals God was inviting humankind to be a kind of co-creator in understanding and shaping the way things are. We are to be creative participants in the unfolding drama of creation. Salvation is not an invitation to escape the world, to be saved from it, but to be creative actors within it. We are world-affirmers, not world-deniers even as we know that much in the world is not the way it is supposed to be.

And finally, as we face the challenges of environmental jeopardy we do not underestimate its seriousness. But neither should we give into a kind of catastrophism that sees only that which is negative. My suspicion is that we do better to celebrate the glories of creation as God's gift on the one hand and look forward in hope to creation's renewal on the other. Within this framework of hope we seek God for present help in time of need as we work for creation's healing and renewal.

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