

Religious and secular concern for the environment

by Jonathan Clatworthy

To avoid climate change catastrophe¹ we have 12 years to change what we do, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)² the United Nations body assessing climate science.

Are Christian reasons for environmental concern different from secular reasons? Don't we all want our children and grandchildren to live healthy and happy lives, believers and non-believers alike?

Secular points of view leave God out of the picture. This means that all our values are human creations. Because we create our own values, whatever we want is what we 'should' seek to achieve. And we all want to preserve the environment.

Of course there is a flaw. Who are 'we'? Popular environmental concern is motivated by the fact that the most powerful people in the world are *not* addressing the problems. If we create our own values, so do they. Their values, as expressed in their actions, show that their priorities lie elsewhere.



Can Christianity do better? I think it can, but it can also do worse. The reason for both is that, for those who believe in God, the highest moral authority transcends every human. Our values come from God. So how we conceive of God makes all the difference.

The ethical role of religion

Apart from modern secular society, all societies studied by sociologists have believed in some kinds of gods. There is a common logical structure. Every society has some way of engaging with its deepest questions: Why are we here? Who created us? For what purpose? By reflecting on the purposes for which we have been created we judge how we should live.³

Unfortunately recent secular theory obscures the connection. At the end of the seventeenth century, after the religious wars, peace was established by separating beliefs about God from matters of government. Later the separation expanded. Nineteenth century atheists believed the universe could be explained without reference to gods, or the beliefs and practices associated with gods. From their perspective these beliefs and practices served no useful purpose and could, so to speak, be put in a box marked 'useless'. They needed a word to describe the box. They therefore borrowed the word 'religion', which had previously had different meanings. 'Religion' became an individual, private matter, nothing to do with the big questions facing society. Because we today

have grown used to this meaning of the word, we easily fail to notice the practical implications of our own faith commitments.⁴

Better Christianity

So what does belief in the Christian God have to offer? There are many different versions of Christianity, and were from the start. My approach is based on the teaching of Jesus as described in recent New Testament scholars like Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, William R Herzog II and Richard Horsley. Jesus, on this view, appealed to a dominant strand in the Hebrew scriptures, known to Christians as the Old Testament. Compared with other traditions of that time and place, the distinctive features of the Hebrew scriptures were more obvious then than they are to us today.

In ancient Mesopotamia the dominant view, as established by the ruling classes, was that the gods created humans to do their housekeeping. Like human rulers, they wanted someone else to maintain their buildings and cook their food. As long as we burn sacrifices and look after the temples, they will keep us in existence. Plagues, floods and military defeat are divine punishments for failure to do our duty.⁵



It was a recipe for exploitation. The peasant farmers produced the sacrificial animals, the ruling classes ate the meat.

This account was recited at the New Year festivals in Babylon in the 6th century BCE. Among the people who heard it were probably some Judean exiles. The first chapter of Genesis may well have been set in its present form by some of the exiles, as an alternative answer to those questions.⁶

Genesis 1 tells us that we have been created by a single god who needs nothing from us. Creating us was an act of pure blessing, so that we may live happy and fulfilled lives. This same god has also created the world, filling it with all the things we need. Provided nobody takes more than their share, there is enough food for everyone and the environment will renew itself every year.⁷

Most governments don't like this, as it tells them not to accumulate wealth and power for themselves at the expense of others. The biblical texts survived in an unusual situation. The Persian Empire allowed Judah self-government,

on the basis that it had an unusual god with a lot of precise laws. There was a corollary: although all humans were created by the same god, Jews were God's chosen race. The tension can be seen in Isaiah 40-55.⁸

Centuries later the first Christians - or at least an influential proportion of them - inherited the monotheism but abandoned the idea of a chosen race. So also did the first Muslims later again. The monotheist claim is that there is nothing wrong with the environment as God has created it. There is no other divine personality to mess up God's plans. When things go wrong, it's because humans are using our God-given freedom to do the wrong things.

So from this monotheist perspective the answer to the question ‘How should we live?’ is ethical. It’s not about altering the environment. It’s about caring for each other, responding to God’s blessing by blessing other people in turn. Living the way God intends means sharing the resources God has provided so that everyone has enough.

Worse Christianity

Christianity has varied widely. Christian emperors didn’t want to blame themselves for the state of their empires. They preferred to believe that suffering and tragedy must be caused by divine authorities: God did this, the devil did that, one tricked the other and that explains why life isn’t better than it is.⁹

Worse was to come. From the fourteenth century onwards western Europe became more urban. Standards of hygiene in the towns were appalling. There followed three centuries of persistent plagues. Poor hygiene wasn’t seen as the cause. There were two influential responses: God is angry, and the environment is to blame.

God is angry

If God is so angry with us, we must be dreadful sinners. The Church had long taught that eternal hell awaits Jews, heretics and Turks; but what if God is angry with us too? Church leaders often made the most of people’s fears. The intensity of suffering in hell increased with the imaginations of preachers. People often spent their lives in terror of the afterlife. Come the Reformation, it looked as if at least half of Christendom was destined for hell – but which half?¹⁰

Intense suffering for eternity, after you die. If you take it seriously, you really aren’t going to worry about the state of the environment in this passing world. From the sixteenth century onwards western church leaders, Catholic and Protestant alike, focused their teaching on the *individual’s* prospects for the next life. The environment ceased to be part of the relationship; it was just a backdrop to the me-and-God scene, with the terrors of eternal hell at stake.¹¹ It is this tradition which motivated some church leaders, in the second half of the twentieth century, to denounce environmental concern as anti-Christian.

The environment is to blame

When philosophers describe the history of environmental destruction a special place is awarded to Francis Bacon, an English government minister at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Bacon inverted Augustine’s theory of the Fall.

Christians today often confuse the doctrine of human sin with the idea of a primeval Fall. A primeval Fall would be when God’s perfect world somehow became imperfect, contrary to God’s intentions. This theory undermines God’s omnipotence. The doctrine of human sin retains God’s omnipotence by stating that our ability to sin is part of God’s intention. God allows us freedom to choose between good and evil so that we have the capacity to grow into real goodness.

Hebrew scholars agree that the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 is an account of human sin. God’s plans did not go wrong. Some early Christians did believe in a primeval Fall. Some such Fall is mentioned twice in the New Testament (Romans 5:12-14 and 8:18-23) but these are only passing references.

Augustine produced the most influential theory of a primeval Fall. On his account the world started off perfect but sin entered it with Adam. This Fall affected humans but left nature in all its

glory as God's good creation. Bacon, on the other hand, taught that *nature* had fallen, but God had given humanity the ability to put it right. The means were science and technology.¹²

Since Bacon's time secular philosophy has abandoned the idea of a Fall and replaced it with an even more pessimistic account. If there is no God, we and our environment are the products of impersonal, unthinking, unintended laws of nature. We humans, unlike the laws of nature, are capable of thinking things through. We should be able to improve on nature.

This tradition treats the natural environment as nothing but a resource, to be used however we want. The human mind, on the other hand, gets its apotheosis: 'we' (our scientists, our governments, whoever we trust) are in the process of taking control of the world and making it better. Adam Smith and Karl Marx both expressed this view, while giving it very different content.¹³

This is the philosophy underpinning the environmental destruction that now troubles us. It is caused not by our failures but by our successes – at doing the wrong things!

Secular environmentalism



Evolution to the rescue. It is now clear that the natural environment is absolutely essential to human life, in many ways we have only recently discovered – and probably in a great many more ways we are yet to discover. We mess with it at our peril.

Correlatively, the human mind isn't so capable of knowing how the environment works, let alone improving on it. The human mind is a development out of something like chimpanzee mind: it has developed to know certain things

but not everything. Patricia Churchland's now famous statement explains a reductionist view:

Boiled down to essentials, a nervous system enables the organism to succeed in the four F's: feeding, fleeing, fighting and reproducing. The principal chore of nervous systems is to get the body parts where they should be in order that the organism may survive... Improvements in sensorimotor control confer an evolutionary advantage: a fancier style of representing is advantageous *so long as it is geared to the organism's way of life and enhances the organism's chances of survival* [Churchland's emphasis]. Truth, whatever that is, definitely takes the hindmost.¹⁴

Although an extreme view, it makes the point that we are not designed to be masters of the universe. Both evolutionary theory and religious faith tell us we have been designed to live within the constraints of the natural environment.

The similarities

On a practical level, Christian concern for the environment is just like secular concern: a response to scientific warnings. Most people, when they accept the research evidence, are concerned about it whether or not they have any kind of religious faith. On a practical level, we have the same reasons.

This means that Christians and atheists can work together for political change, for better education, and for campaigning groups like Friends of the Earth and Extinction Rebellion. We are doing the same kind of thing. We value our lives, we want the best for future generations, we see the need for change.

The difference

The difference is that religious believers have a stronger philosophy behind their concern. We share the same values – or at least, near enough the same values as far as the environment is concerned. But how do we justify our values? What makes us think we have the *right* values?

On this point, atheist concern is weak. If there is no God, then all our values are human constructs: we create our own values. But it is quite clear that different people have different values. We in the industrialised West are governed by people who are not responding appropriately to the threats to our environment. They are more concerned about economic analyses or jobs.

To say that ‘we create our own values’ is unclear. It can mean ‘each of us creates the values by which to live as an individual’. If this is all it means, it offers no possibility of *societies* living by shared values. Being different people, we create different values. If this is all our values can be, we will always be in conflict over them.

Alternatively, we may think that the ‘we’ who create our values are society. Together, we think through which values to have. The problem here is that we do not do so equally. The loudest voices are the most influential: the owners of newspapers, television programmes and social media. The rest of us depend on them for our information. Increasingly, they are investing in psychological techniques to manipulate our values.

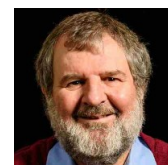
In either case the environment loses. If we create our own values *as individuals*, conflict between individuals is inevitable. If we create them *as a society*, we adopt the values of the most powerful – the very people who are preventing effective action to protect the environment.

Christians – and more generally people who believe in the divine – can appeal to a moral authority higher than every human, who knows which values are best for us. We can disagree about what God’s values are, as we always have done; but we accept that there are right answers which transcend any one human being, however powerful.

This gives us a task: to cooperate with each other. We learn from experience, we learn from other people’s experiences, and we work together on exploring the best ways to live. In effect this is what climate scientists have been doing, to produce their reports and recommendations. Christians can put it in a wider context. We cooperate with each other in trying to understand, and submit to, the highest values – God’s values. In addition to the scientific research, there is also the task of praying and meditating about what a God’s-eye-view must be like. Trust God: there must be a right answer.

Biography

Jonathan Clatworthy is an Anglican priest and an author of a number of books, including *Why Progressives Need God: An ethical defence of monotheism* (Christian Alternative, 2017), and *Making Sense of Faith in God: How belief makes science possible* (SPCK, 2012). He blogs at www.clatworthy.org and is a trustee of Modern Church (<https://modernchurch.org.uk/>) He has also been a university chaplain and tutor in Philosophy and Ethics.



Picture References

Page¹ Image by Gerd Altman, Pixabay <https://pixabay.com/illustrations/earth-globe-water-wave-sea-lake-216834/>

Page² Creation - Day 1, from Art in the Christian Tradition, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=46170> [retrieved March 13, 2019].

Page⁴ Image by Stuart Hampton, Pixabay <https://pixabay.com/photos/protest-models-art-artist-2265287/>

References

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/08/global-warming-must-not-exceed-15c-warns-landmark-un-report>

² <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>

³ Eliade, *Patterns*, pp. 30-99.

⁴ The process is described in Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion*.

⁵ The Mesopotamian texts are the *Atrahasis* and the *Enuma Elis*. See Bottéro, *Mesopotamia*; Nemet-Nejat, *Daily Life*.

⁶ The relationship between the *Enuma Elis* and Genesis 1 has been much discussed by Hebrew scholars, eg Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, Smith, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1*.

⁷ Some Hebrew scholars dispute it. It is possible to argue that monotheism is not overt until the second century CE, with Irenaeus and the other apologists. My own view is that Hebrew ethics – and the ethics of Jesus as he appeals to the Hebrew tradition – reveals a philosophy that makes sense within monotheism but not outside it. Here I am following John Barton's *Ethics and the Old Testament*. See also Gnuse, *No Other Gods*.

⁸ Smith, *Palestinian Parties*, Chapter 6.

⁹ Frances Young describes the process in many of her works. A good introduction is *Construing the Cross*. There is a briefer account in her 'Insight or Incoherence?'

¹⁰ Bonner, *The Christian Hell*; Delumeau, *Sin and Fear*; Turner, *The History of Hell*.

¹¹ Santmire, *The Travail of Nature*.

¹² Many environmental philosophers have explored this theme. Among them are Merchant, *The Death of Nature* and Capra, *The Turning Point*.

¹³ The developing attitudes to progress in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are described in Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, Chapters 6 and 7.

¹⁴ Churchland, P, *Journal of Philosophy* 84 (October 1987), p. 548.

Bibliography

General

I have described this approach at greater length in Clatworthy, Jonathan, *Why Progressives Need God: An Ethical Defence of Monotheism*, Winchester: Christian Alternative, 2017.

New Testament scholars on the teaching of Jesus

The 'Third Quest for the Historical Jesus' is usually dated from the 1970s, and is current today. It contrasts with earlier accounts by treating Jesus as fully immersed in the cultural and economic issues of first century Galilean peasant life. Within this context there remains much lively debate.

Borg, Marcus, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*, London: SPCK, 2011.

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Also worth reading is Nongbri, Brent, *Before Religion: A history of a modern concept*, Yale: Yale University Press, 2013.

Anthropology on the divine

Many anthropologists of religion continue to puzzle over how and why 'religion was invented' as though it was a universal error that needed explanation. Eliade offers a more sympathetic approach.

Eliade, Mircea, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, London & New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958

The divine in Mesopotamia

A good introduction is Bottéro, Jean, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*, Chicago: Uni Chicago Press, 2001.

Nemet-Nejat, Karen Rhea, *Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*, Westport, Conn., London: Greenwood Press, 1998.

Porter, Barbara Nevling, Ed, *One God or Many?: Concepts of Divinity in the Ancient World*, Chebeague, Maine: Casco Bay Assyriological Institute, 2000.

The divine in the Hebrew scriptures

In general I like John Barton's approach. Barton, John, *Ethics and the Old Testament*, London: SCM, 1998.

B W Anderson's works are a little dated now but offer easy introductions. Anderson, Bernhard W. ed, *Creation in the Old Testament*, London: SPCK, 1984.

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Developments within Christianity

Frances Young is a Patristics scholar. Her writings describe how divergent ideas about Christ and salvation developed in the early Church.

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An easy introduction to changing Christian ideas of Hell – with images – is Turner, Alice, *The History of Hell*, New York & London: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1993.

A major study of Christian attitudes to sin, guilt and Hell is Delumeau, Jean, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture 13th-18th Centuries*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1990.

A small book illustrating how nineteenth-century children were encouraged to behave well for fear of eternal Hell is Bonner, Hypatia Bradlaugh, *The Christian Hell*, London: Watts, 1913.

Modern attitudes to the environment

The 1980s and 1990s produced a number of good publications by environmental philosophers exploring how western society developed a cavalier attitude to the environment.

An overview is Santmire, Paul, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985.

A feminist approach, strongly critiquing Bacon, is Merchant, Carolyn, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1983.

Very influential was Capra, Fritjof, *The Turning Point: Science, Society and the Rising Culture*, London: Fontana, Flamingo, 1982.

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Evolutionary theories of ethics

Especially since the 1980s, modern debate has been influenced by various determinist theories, among them the idea that all our ethical values are determined by our evolutionary history. For a variety of approaches by evolutionary ethicists see Nitecki, Matthew H & Doris V, *Evolutionary Ethics*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993.

In the 1980s a spate of books on evolutionary ethics argued that all our moral attitudes are determined by our evolution. The best known are by E O Wilson and Richard Dawkins. Rolston, Holmes, III, *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple UP, 1988, criticises their theories from a religious perspective.

Meaning and value

A common atheist claim is that all human senses of meaning, purpose and value are errors: we have been created by unthinking laws of nature for no intended reason at all.

An introduction to the idea is a collection of essays by Klemke, E D, Ed, *The Meaning of Life*, New York & Oxford: OUP, 1981. It includes Tolstoy's *Confession* which is well worth reading.

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The *John Ray Initiative* promotes responsible environment stewardship in accordance with Christian principles and the wise use of science and technology. JRI organises seminars and disseminates information on environmental stewardship.

Inspiration for JRI is taken from John Ray (1627-1705), English naturalist, Christian theologian and first biological systematist of modern times, preceding Carl Linnaeus.

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