

Should Christians be 'green'?

by Brian McKinlay

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
... Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." - Jesus of Nazareth¹

"It's not that easy bein' green" - Kermit the Frog²

If we are to discuss whether Christians should be Green,³ we need to have an idea of what being Green is. For this, we may look at the principles of the Green political parties. There is a Green political and social philosophy, but it is important to note that the call to "be Green" is also a call to action. The Green view is an activist one.

The 1993 *Guiding principles of the European Federation of Green Parties*⁴ are declared to be "the first-ever attempt to create a Pan-European strategy of ecological and social reform." In its introduction, the document contends that:

The so-called progress of the past centuries has brought us into a situation where the basis of life on Earth is seriously under threat. While technological development may delay the deterioration of the environment for a time, it cannot prevent the ecological and social collapse of civilisation without a fundamental change in the ideology of unquestioned material growth, which still prevails.⁵

The European Greens require the economy to be adapted to the tolerance of the natural environment, aiming for "ecological sustainability, equity and social justice, and self-reliance."⁶ A sustainable world economy will enable us to meet our own needs, without jeopardising future generations.⁷ A new global security structure must be established to achieve world peace.⁸ The Green's policies are based on sustainable use and not on unlimited consumption. They

¹ Matthew 5:3,5 (NRSV).

² First line of the song "It's Not Easy Bein' Green", lyrics by Joe Raposo, from *The Muppet Show* television series. (URL: http://www.cs.unc.edu/~arthur/songs/bein_green)

³ Rather than using quotes to distinguish "green" as an adjective or noun for the political and social philosophy I shall use a capital letter.

⁴ European Federation of Green Parties. *Guiding principles of European Federation of Green Parties as agreed upon during the conference at Masala, Finland, June 20th 1993*. URL: <http://utopia.knoware.nl/users/oterhaar/greens/europe/princips.htm>

⁵ *Ibid.*, Foreword.

⁶ *Ibid.*, para. 1.5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, para. 1.6.

⁸ *Idem.*

favour "co-operation not competition," and "peace and security, not warfare and aggression."⁹

In their environmental policy document on *Care for the Earth*, the Australian Greens:

... recognise that the Earth's life support systems are fundamental to maximising human welfare. [...] In formulating an Environment Policy, the Australian Greens are striving for ecological sustainability through: (a) the protection of biological diversity and the maintenance of ecological integrity; (b) the use of material resources in accordance with the Earth's capacity to supply them and to assimilate wastes arising from their use; and (c) equity within and between generations. [...] To become ecologically sustainable, our society must change over time from one which recognises no physical or ecological limits, to one which lives within the capacity of the Earth to support it and allows for the Earth to sustain the diversity of living things. This means that ingenuity must be used to do more with less, the trend to more efficient use of physical resources and energy must be accelerated, and the limits within which society and the economy function must be explicitly recognised.¹⁰

Similarly, in their *International issues* policy, as the principle underlying international environmental sustainability, the Australian Greens "support the conservation of the Earth's environment and its biodiversity, both as a value in itself and as essential for human survival and happiness."¹¹

An important United Nations document is the *World charter for nature* adopted by the General Assembly in 1988.¹² Though it does not use potentially loaded terms like "green", the General Assembly advances much the same principles.

In his famed 1967 paper *The Historic roots of our ecological crisis*,¹³ Lynn White Jr. argued that attitudes developed in the Latin West in the Middle Ages led to the rise of science and technology, the union of which empowered the threat to human existence posed by ecological catastrophe. The Bible banished the spirits from nature and Christianity became the most anthropocentric religion in history. "Western theology has been voluntarist", White wrote. "The Eastern saint contemplates; the Western saint acts."

⁹ *Ibid.*, para. 1.1.

¹⁰ The Australian Greens. [Policy on] *Care for the Earth*. (URL: <http://www.peg.apc.org/~ausgreen/pol-env.html>), para 1.1.

¹¹ The Australian Greens. [Policy on] *International issues*. (URL: <http://www.peg.apc.org/~ausgreen/pol-inta.html>), para 2.1.

¹² United Nations. General Assembly. *World charter for nature* (1982). - UN General Assembly Resolution 37/7.

¹³ White, Lynn, Jr. "The Historical roots of our ecologic crisis." *Science* 155(3767):1203-1207, 10 March 1967.

White's historical conclusions have been contested, for example by James Barr¹⁴ and by A.R. Peacocke.¹⁵ It is also argued that it is not the biblical outlook on nature but human sin that is the problem. But if Western Christianity's activism has been instrumental in bringing about ecological crisis, it would be some compensation were Western Christians able to be similarly active on behalf of a Green agenda.

In his *Loving nature : ecological integrity and Christian responsibility*,¹⁶ John Nash begins with "dimensions and dilemmas" of present world ecology. He groups these challenges under two headings: *the pollution complex* is one of pollution, global warming and ozone depletion. We are *exceeding the limits* by exhaustion of resources, expanding population, maldistribution of human wealth, loss of biodiversity, and genetic engineering.¹⁷ These problems suggest to Nash, nine countervailing virtues. Key among these is *sustainability*, "living within the bounds of the regenerative, absorptive and carrying capacities of the earth, continuously and indefinitely."¹⁸ Sustainability has become the touchstone of ecologically sound practice. But as Nash notes, it must be complemented by other values, notably distributive justice. The other virtues commended by Nash are *adaptability* - accommodation to aspects of nature which cannot be changed; *relationality* - an holistic approach brought about by an acute awareness of the interconnectedness of all things; *frugality* - thrift, moderation, efficiency and simplicity of lifestyle; *equity* - justice in the distribution of goods and services; *solidarity* - commitment by the international community; *biodiversity* - which is both a fact and a value to be pursued; *sufficiency* - application of solutions genuinely proportionate to the task at hand; and *humility* - recognition of the limits of human knowledge, ingenuity, morality and importance.

Hopefully from the above, we have some idea of what being Green means and the reasons why one might be Green. In particular, we note that the

¹⁴ Barr, James. "Man and nature: the ecological controversy and the Old Testament." *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 55:9-32, 1972.

¹⁵ Peacocke, A.R. "On 'The Historical roots of our ecological crisis'" in *Man and nature* / edited by Hugh Montefiore. - London: Collins, 1975, pp. 155-158.

¹⁶ *Loving nature : ecological integrity and Christian responsibility*. / James A. Nash. - Nashville and Washington: Abingdon and the Churches' Center for Theology and Public Policy, 1991.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.23-63.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.64.

Green idea is one of action, centred on ecological sustainability, justice and peace. So now we have the question, "Should Christians be Green?" This question has two related aspects: (1) is it *possible* for we Christians to be Green - given the boundaries and potentialities of the faith?; and if so, (2) *ought* we (by and large) be Green - or should we have differing priorities and apply our energies elsewhere? Our answers will be determined or influenced by the sources of our faith - scripture and tradition - but as well by our experience and observations living in a the world - in this case most particularly by science and the demands of the Green agenda itself for ecological action and equity. Of course Christianity by no means has a monopoly on religious concern for the environment.^{19,20}

The particular task here is to consider the contribution made by the theological concept of *imago Dei* to the questions posed for Christians by the possibility of "being Green". Christian discussion of the *imago Dei* has of

¹⁹ Leading scientists, meeting at the Moscow Conference on Environment and Development in January 1990, published *Preserving and cherishing the Earth: a joint commitment in science and religion: an open letter to the religious community*, appealing for co-operative action.

We are close to committing many would argue we are already committing what in religious language is sometimes called Crimes against Creation. [...] The historical record makes clear that religious teaching, example and leadership are able to influence personal conduct and commitment powerfully. [...] We understand that what is regarded as sacred is more likely to be treated with care and respect. Our planetary home should be so regarded. Efforts to safeguard and cherish the environment need to be infused with a vision of the sacred. At the same time, a much wider and deeper understanding of science and technology is needed. If we do not understand the problem, it is unlikely we will be able to fix it. Thus, there is a vital role for both religion and science. We know that the well-being of our planetary environment is already a source of profound concern in your councils and congregations. We hope this appeal will encourage a spirit of common cause and joint action to help preserve the Earth.¹⁹

In *A Response from the religious community*, 271 senior spiritual leaders from 83 countries and every major world religion endorsed the scientists' appeal.

We are moved by the Appeal's spirit and challenged by its substance. We share its sense of urgency. This invitation to collaboration marks a unique moment and opportunity in the relationship of science and religion. [...] We believe the environmental crisis is intrinsically religious. All faith traditions and teachings firmly instruct us to revere and care for the natural world. Yet sacred Creation is being violated and is in ultimate jeopardy as a result of long-standing human behaviour. A religious response is essential to reverse such long-standing patterns of neglect and exploitation.¹⁹

source: Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders. Conference on Environment and Development (1990 : Moscow). *Preserving and cherishing the Earth: a joint commitment in science and religion - an open letter to the religious community and A Response from the religious community*. (URL: <http://www.nrpe.org>).

²⁰ For an inter-faith dialogue on environment and ecology, see *Spirit and nature : why the environment is a religious issue : an interfaith dialogue* / edited by Steven C. Rockefeller and John C. Elder. - Boston : Beacon Press, 1992.

course a very long history, beginning in Patristic times and still continuing.²¹ Here we are only able to look briefly at some relatively recent contributions relevant to our topic. The expression *imago Dei*, meaning "image of God" derives from the references to humans being created in the image of God in Genesis 1.26-28, 5.1-2 and 9.6-7. There are also enriching parallels in Psalm 8 and Job 28. It is legitimate to describe humans in image terms, and we are privileged to speak of God and to God. But as Charles Sherlock points out, any "attempt to define a precise image of God is fraught with danger and may well be idolatrous."²² As there is therefore an indefinable transcendence and mystery to the *imago Dei*, there is some character of mystery in being human. As *the* human image of God, Christ restores the corruption of the *imago Dei* corrupted by sin. As in all aspects of the redemptive work, this is a "now, but not yet" event. Our place as bearers of the *imago Dei* has been assured through the work of Christ, yet we are engaged in its outworking and renewal in the world. "Beloved, we are God's children now", and therefore made in his image now, but "what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is." (I John 3.2, NRSV)

Following Karl Barth, Charles Sherlock asserts that, "If we are not told in Scripture what the 'image of God' *is* we should not expect to know." Therefore, rather than asking, "What is the image of God?" he argues, it is better to ask, "What does it mean to be made in the image of God?"²³

Jürgen Moltmann gives an outstanding overview of the concept of the *imago Dei* in a chapter of his *God in creation*.²⁴ As for much of his work, Moltmann writes with a Messianic perspective. "The true likeness of God is to be found", he says, "not with God's history with mankind but at its end."²⁵ The Genesis commissions to dominion are not identical with the likeness of God,

²¹ A summary of research and debate in the century to 1998 can be found in *The Image of God : Genesis 1:26-28 in a century of Old Testament research* / Gunnlaugur A. Jónsson. - Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1988 (Coniectanea Biblica. Old Testament series; 26). This work includes a brief chapter on the impacts of ecology, feminism and liberation theology (pp. 178-191).

²² *The Doctrine of humanity* / Charles Sherlock. - Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1996, p.32.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.33. Sherlock attributes the idea to Barth on p.89.

²⁴ *God in creation : a new theology of creation and the Spirit of God* / Jürgen Moltmann. - Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993, chapter 9, pp. 215-243.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.225.

Moltmann observes - they are an addition to it.²⁶ The likeness of God is not found essentially in rulership. In the New Testament, Paul uses the concept of likeness to God to present Jesus as God's true image (2 Corinthians 4.4-6). The *imago Dei* is fulfilled and mediated to us in the *imago Christi*. The appointment to rule over animals and the earth appears as the 'ruling with Christ' of believers (Revelation 5.10). (In passing, we can note that the attributes of Christ's rule resemble the Green agenda - permanence, peace, and justice. But the supreme principle in the rulership of Christ is love.)

In a survey of developments in the study of the *imago Dei* concept in the century to 1988, Gunnlaugur Jönsson concluded that a 'functional' view has come to dominate, a view which is holistic and directed to understanding in context the purposes and outcomes of humankind's creation in the image of God - rather than an attempt determine the meaning of the *imago Dei* as such. The only view which Gunnlaugur Jönsson in his survey concluded could challenge the functional understanding of the *imago Dei* is a relational interpretation, of which Karl Barth²⁷ and Claus Westermann²⁸ have been exponents.

Westermann argues that the creation of humankind "in the image and likeness of God" is not a declaration about humans, but about God's creative act. Its meaning is in God's purpose itself. "The Creator created a creature that corresponds to him, to whom he can speak, and who can hear him."²⁹ The "simple and obvious" explanation of the phrase, Westermann believes, is that humankind was created in order that something might happen between God and humans. Humankind was created to stand before God.³⁰ Thus its essence of the *imago Dei* is in relationship between God and human.

Nevertheless, Westermann describes the image of God in humans and their dominion in creation as qualities which characterise humankind.³¹ Again, the two characteristics are not inherently linked. However, they are so

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.224.

²⁷ Barth's ideas on the image of God in man are discussed by David Cairns in chapter 13 of *The Image of God in man*. - Rev. ed. - London: Collins Fontana, 1973, pp. 170-186.

²⁸ *Creation* / Claus Westermann. - London: SPCK, 1974.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.56.

³⁰ *Idem.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.49.

intermingled in practice and conversation, I suggest, that it would be naïve to discuss the *imago Dei* without some *apologia* for the Genesis concept of dominion or rulership in creation. Westermann observes two important aspects of human dominion as conferred by God in the Genesis account. First, human dominion is described in the language used of the rulership of kings. (This language is echoed in Psalm 8.) As lord of the realm, the king was to mediate blessings for the realm entrusted to him. "Man (*sic*) would fail in his royal office of dominion over the earth were he to exploit the earth's resources to the detriment of the land, plant life, animals, rivers and seas."³² Secondly, human dominion was to be over animals. Notwithstanding the later consumption of animals for human food, Westermann contends that the intention of God for this relationship between man and the beasts of the field was that it be one of trust, and a pattern of man's attitude towards the world.³³

Recalling our earlier questions, we have found nothing in the *imago Dei* concept which makes it not *possible* for orthodox Christians to be Green. There is also an implication, particularly in the 'functional' view of the *imago Dei*, that Christians *ought* to be Green. If, with Moltmann, we agree that the image of God in humankind is to be revealed as the image of Christ, then the outworking of the *imago Dei* will be through the achievement of the purposes of Christ, by the Spirit. We are therefore well able to ask, "Is a Green agenda within the purposes of God in Christ?" and if the answer is, "Yes", to examine the role of Christians in its achievement.

James Nash develops this theme in *Loving nature*.³⁴ The image and dominion concepts in Genesis 1 are not mandates for oppression and totalitarian rule over nature - such anthropocentric oppression of nature is a usurpation of divine sovereignty. Rather, the *imago Dei* is a special role or function - a vocation to ecological responsibility as representatives of the divine. This role, arriving late in evolutionary history, is, Nash suggests, primarily one of protection *by* humans of the planet and its inhabitants *against*

³² *Ibid.*, p.52.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.54.

³⁴ Nash, *op.cit.*, pp.102-108.

human exploitation.³⁵ Such a divine mandate lies squarely within the Green agenda.

In considering the impetus the *imago Dei* concept gives toward our "being Green", we should of course make some attempt to place it in its broader theological context. There has been a great deal of writing in recent decades directed towards a theology of creation, to which it is impossible to do justice here. Some useful works are indicated in the footnotes.³⁶

In Nash's *Loving nature*, for example, his consideration of the "image of God" doctrine in an ecological context is but one element in a review of the doctrines of creation, covenant, divine image, incarnation, spiritual presence, sin, judgment, redemption and church - all directed towards establishing "firm foundations" for an assessment of the role and place of the Christian human in an ecological context.³⁷ For Nash, the primary value for the Christian in God's creation is love.

Perhaps the most urgent and difficult task in the development of a Christian ecological ethic is an adequate interpretation of Christian love in an ecological context. The task is essential, in my view, because love is the integrating center of Christian faith and ethics. If so, a Christian ecological ethic is seriously deficient - even if conceivable - unless it is grounded in Christian love.³⁸

Here then, we have not merely *permission* for Christians to be Green, but a fundamental *reason and motivation* - the reason of love for God's creation. This above all is a motive for an outworking in creation of the *imago Christi* in and through the creation. I would add that the scientifically observed facts of the "ecological crisis" also provide Christians with an imperative toward being

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.106.

³⁶ Sean McDonagh provides an excellent simple overview in *To care for the Earth*. - London: Chapman, 1986. Following a substantial historical survey, Paul H. Santmire in *The Travail of nature : the ambiguous ecological promise of Christian theology* (Philadelphia : Fortress, 1985) provides what he describes as a schematization of an ecological reading of biblical theology (chapter 10, pp. 189-218). Charles Birch's Templeton Prize winning book *On purpose* (Kensington: NSW U.Pr., 1990) discusses God and human in creation from a holistic perspective centred in process thought and a thorough-going background in the history of science. A feminist perspective is provided by Rosemary Radford Ruether in *Gaia and God : an ecofeminist theology of Earth history* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992). Thomas Berry is an important contemporary thinker on ecological theology. For an introduction to Berry's thinking, see Collins (note 39), pp.150-163. See also *Creation spirituality : liberating gifts for the peoples of the Earth* / Matthew Fox. - HarperSanFrancisco, 1991. And of course, I have by no means done full justice to Moltmann's theology of creation, of which there is an excellent summary in *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann* by Richard Bauckham (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995) pp.183-198.

³⁷ Nash, *op.cit.*, chapters 4 and 5, pp.93-138.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.139.

green. Only if we were to believe that our Christian duty is but to save as many souls as possible in a doomed and perishing world might we ignore such an imperative. This view has been dominant in some periods of history and is of course sincerely held by some Christians today.

As an example of a creation theology arguing for Christian commitment to continuation of the natural realm, I have selected Paul Collins's book, *God's Earth*,³⁹ This work serves to illustrate some points concerning the relationship between one's theology of creation and being Green generally. In *God's Earth*, Collins begins from a conviction that humankind is unconscionably and disastrously destroying the earth and its living environment. He asserts that religion will no longer exist if the natural world continues to be devastated in this way. In a world where nature is driven out, we will lose touch with the possibility for culture, religion and spirituality.⁴⁰ Collins criticises anthropocentrism - assignment of absolute priority to the human - as the great failing of our religious traditions. We are more likely to encounter God's presence in the natural world than in the Bible or in human institutions, he argues.⁴¹ This implies change in our understanding of the nature of God and the theology of revelation. "My ultimate purpose...", he says, "is to try to discover something of the transcendent presence that stands behind the natural world and the cosmos, and which alone gives meaning to all of creation."⁴² Though many have found Biblical encouragement for a view sympathetic to ecology, Collins is more cautious. While taking account of texts positive towards God's creation (Romans 8.22-23, Colossians 1.15-17), Collins believes that Christianity is yet to overcome the imperative found in the creation texts for domination and rulership of the natural realm.

Collins declares that our responsibility, knowing our impact on the environment, is to be converted by experiencing a radical change from a human focus to interconnectedness with the natural realm. The kind of God which could save us in response to such a conversion is the God whose mysterious

³⁹ *God's Earth: religion as if matter really mattered* by Paul Collins. - North Blackburn: Dove Books, 1995.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.4.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.10.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.11.

presence is found and symbolised in nature. Though Christ is an exemplar of God's involvement in and commitment to the natural world and its ultimate redemption or re-creation, Collins finds the natural world to be the pre-eminent place where God may be found. Christ is not the centre of history so much as the "ultimate symbol that God takes God's material world seriously."⁴³ The resurrection is thus a foretaste of the restoration and bringing-to-completion of the creation.

In Collins's work we have a general theological case for "being Green". But *God's Earth* also illustrates grounds for caution. In being Green, Christians may be tempted to adopt non-Christian doctrines and spiritualities. In particular Green Christians may need to distinguish clearly between the nature as *sacred* and nature as *divine*. This is a trap Collins of course avoids. The high place Collins accords the natural world as a source of revelation and knowledge of God has far reaching implications for christology and the theology of revelation. But, I suggest, a case for the natural world as the preëminent source of God's self-revelation is not sustained without consideration of other possibilities. There is a simple logic to Collins's statement that we have only this one world and that here and nowhere else will we find God. But if we use this to impose a supreme obligation to preserve the earth as a necessary prerequisite to finding God, we take on ourselves an element of salvation by human works.

Being Green challenges Christians to set aside an anthropocentric view of creation and to rethink the meaning of the *imago Dei*. But it does not (and should not, in my view) require a weakening of Christ-centred faith. The God of the Christian is a God who is creator, purposeful, and ultimately sovereign. Would the redemptive purposes of such a God be thwarted simply by human neglect of the natural universe? Might not God intervene to prevent such human error from bringing ultimate disaster? Has he not already done so in Christ? Just such questions make Moltmann's conception of the ultimate fulfillment in Christ of God's purpose in creation so attractive.

We have seen that the Green program is a program of action (defining action in the broadest possible sense). It is centred on sustainability, justice,

⁴³ Ibid., p.243.

equity and peace. Traditional understandings of the *imago Dei* have been criticised as anthropocentric and divorcing humankind from its proper place and role in creation. More recent scholarship has brought an understanding that the image of God in humankind can and should be outworked in creation in a way that is centred in creation and in God's own self. Some (for example Moltmann) have found our place in creation to be best manifest through an expression of the image of Christ as the ultimate perfection of the image of God in man and woman.

Consequently, we have seen that recent theology in particular makes it entirely possible for Christians to be Green. This is a strong example of the importance of theology being up to date. Nonetheless, Christians may need to guard against uncritically adopting views which put nature in the place of the divine and displace the uniqueness of God's self revelation in Christ. Most recently, Christian thinkers have begun to discover that a commitment to the expression of God's love requires of us a love commitment to God's creation. We are beginning to find that Christians indeed *ought* to be Green. We are may yet discover that we *must* be so.

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