A Christian View of the Environment

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Version 0.3.0
In an era when environmental issues are often at the forefront of conversation, it is worth reflecting on a Christian approach to these issues. What point of view is given on these issues in the Bible? What view have Christian writers of the past taken? In particular, what is the Christian view of the relationship between God and Nature, between God and humanity, and between humanity and the world around us?

While the image of our “Blue Marble” on the left is the product of 21st century NASA satellite technology, the English mystic Julian of Norwich (1342 – 1416) saw something very similar in the visions which she experienced and recorded in 1373. Twenty years later, she was to reflect on the relationship between this small round ball and its Creator:

“And in this He showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazel-nut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed; and it was as round as any ball.

I looked thereupon with the eye of my understanding, and I thought: What may this be? And it was answered generally thus: It is all that is made.

I marvelled how it might last, for methought it might suddenly have fallen to naught for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts, and ever shall, for God loves it – and so all things have their beginning by the love of God.

In this little thing, I saw three properties: the first is that God made it, the second is that God loves it, and the third is that God keeps it.”

– Revelations of Divine Love, 1393, 1st Revelation, Chapter V, Westminster Manuscript (translated into modern English)
And God saw that it was good

The constant refrain of the Genesis creation story is that God is pleased with the Universe he has created – God values Creation in the same way that craftspeople value the work their hands, and this value placed on Creation by God demands our respect:

“And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas: and God saw that it was good.

And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth: and it was so.

And the earth brought forth grass, and herb yielding seed after his kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself, after his kind: and God saw that it was good. And the evening and the morning were the third day.

And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years:

And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth: and it was so.

And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also.

And God set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth, And to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness: and God saw that it was good.

And the evening and the morning were the fourth day.

And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven.

And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind: and God saw that it was good.”

— Genesis, 1:10–21
For thy pleasure they are and were created

The primary purpose of the Universe, from the Christian point of view, is to give glory to God:

“The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork.
Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge.
There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard.
Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.”

– Psalm 19:1–4a

“And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal: and in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, were four beasts full of eyes before and behind.
And the first beast was like a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle.
And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, LORD God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.
And when those beasts give glory and honour and thanks to him that sat on the throne, who liveth for ever and ever,
The four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying,
Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.”

– Revelation, 4:6–11
The Canticle of the Sun

Recovering from an illness in the year 1224, St Francis is said to have written this famous canticle, which expresses the fact that each of our fellow-creatures praises God simply through its existence:

“Most High, omnipotent good Lord, 
Yours are the praises, the glory, the honour, and every blessing, 
To you alone, Most High, do they belong, 
Yet no man is worthy to name you:

Be praised therefore, my Lord, through all your creatures, 
Especially through my brother, Sir Sun, 
Who brings the day, and you give light through him. 
Beautiful he is, and radiant in his great splendour: 
So that, Most High, he symbolises you.

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars: 
In the heavens you formed them, clear and precious and beautiful 
Be praised, my Lord, through Brother Wind 
And through the air and the clouds and both calm and stormy weather, 
Through which you nourish your Creation.

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Water, 
Who is very useful and humble and precious and pure. 
Be praised, my Lord, through Brother Fire, 
Through whom you illuminate the night: 
He is beautiful and cheerful and powerful and strong.

Be praised, my Lord, through our sister Mother Earth, 
Who sustains and governs us, 
And produces a diversity of fruits and colourful flowers and herbs.

Be praised, my Lord, through all who forgive for love of you, 
And patiently endure infirmity and tribulation. 
Happy are those who endure in peace, 
For from you, Most High, they will receive a crown.”
I will sing praise to my God while I have my being

Psalm 104 explores how all Creation reveals the greatness of God:

“Bless the LORD, O my soul. O LORD my God, thou art very great; thou art clothed with honour and majesty. Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment: who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain:

Who layeth the beams of his chambers in the waters: who maketh the clouds his chariot: who walketh upon the wings of the wind: Who maketh his angels spirits; his ministers a flaming fire:

Who laid the foundations of the earth, that it should not be removed for ever. Thou coverest it with the deep as with a garment: the waters stood above the mountains. At thy rebuke they fled; at the voice of thy thunder they hasted away. They go up by the mountains; they go down by the valleys unto the place which thou hast founded for them. Thou hast set a bound that they may not pass over; that they turn not again to cover the earth.

He sendeth the springs into the valleys, which run among the hills. They give drink to every beast of the field: the wild asses quench their thirst. By them shall the fowls of the heaven have their habitation, which sing among the branches. He watereth the hills from his chambers: the earth is satisfied with the fruit of thy works.

He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man: that he may bring forth food out of the earth; And wine that maketh glad the heart of man, and oil to make his face to shine, and bread which strengtheneth man's heart.

... The young lions roar after their prey, and seek their meat from God. The sun ariseth, they gather themselves together, and lay them down in their dens. Man goeth forth unto his work and to his labour until the evening.

O LORD, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches. So is this great and wide sea, wherein are things creeping innumerable, both small and great beasts.”

— Psalm 104:1–15, 21–25
So God created man in his own image

Among the things created by God are human beings. Unique among other created things, human beings are formed, as Genesis 1 says, “in the image of God.”

Human beings share the physical existence of “Sister Moon” and “Brother Fire.” However, human beings also share the spiritual nature of angels and of God.

Much as dolphins combine the nature of breathing mammals with the nature of fish swimming in water, so human beings bridge the spiritual and material domains. The “image of God” involves more than that, though – we also share God’s joy in creation, for example.

From Christian point of view, the purpose of human existence is to be in a mutually loving relationship with God, praising and honouring him, and enjoying his gifts.

“What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.

– Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 1

“Creatures below us and above us bring Glory to God... shall every thing glorify God but Man?”

– Thomas Watson, A Body of Practical Divinity (1692)

“Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.”

– 1 Corinthians, 10:31
Working with his hands the thing which is good

For the Christian, one important way of honouring God in our interactions with Nature is to follow in God’s footsteps by creating things ourselves. Part of the “image of God” within each of us is the urge to do this.

The Apostle Paul speaks of this in his Epistle to the Ephesians:

“Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth.”

– Ephesians, 4:28

This verse captures the two kinds of love which should reveal themselves in our work – love for God and love for our neighbour. Creating objects which benefit other people is a very practical way of loving them, but creating beautiful things is also a way of expressing our love for God. Such work is also a way of increasing our understanding of God’s own creative process.

Naturally, following in God’s footsteps with regards to work should also involve “talking time to smell the roses.” Even God rested after working for six days.
Stewardship

Christianity teaches that God has a relationship with the physical universe He created, and also that God has a relationship with human beings, who bridge the gap between the physical and spiritual realms. What then should be the relationship between human beings and the physical universe?

The Bible speaks of the role of a steward. The image here is of God as an estate-owner absent on a journey, and human beings as the servants placed in charge of the estate on his behalf. God expects his servants to deliver results – not financial results, of course, but the kind of results God himself enjoys. Also implicit in the account is the idea that the estate should be looked after:

“For the kingdom of heaven is as a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey.

Then he that had received the five talents went and traded with the same, and made them other five talents. And likewise he that had received two, he also gained other two. But he that had received one went and digged in the earth, and hid his lord's money.

After a long time the lord of those servants cometh, and reckoneth with them. And so he that had received five talents came and brought other five talents, saying, Lord, thou deliverest unto me five talents: behold, I have gained beside them five talents more. His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.

... Then he which had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed: And I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine. His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant!”

— Matthew, 25:14–21, 24–26a
Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed

What constitutes good stewardship? Prayerful use of Nature is certainly appropriate. Taking what we need for food, clothing, medicine, and shelter is something authorised by God in Genesis 1. If we are taking from Nature in order to help others, the justification is even stronger.

However, when we take from Nature, we must do so in a sustainable way. If we take from Nature in a way which causes damage, we are effectively stealing from future generations, by depriving them of the food, clothing, medicine, and shelter which they need. Proper stewardship therefore requires farming in a way that rejuvenates the soil and keeps it productive. One traditional way of doing this is to rotate between different crops. Native Americans had another method, keeping their cornfields productive by burying dead fish alongside the newly-planted seeds – fish being an effective organic fertiliser.

“For the LORD thy God bringeth thee into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills; A land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of oil olive, and honey; A land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness, thou shalt not lack any thing in it; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills thou mayest dig brass. When thou hast eaten and art full, then thou shalt bless the LORD thy God for the good land which he hath given thee.”

— Deuteronomy, 8:7–10
Since human beings are stewards of Nature, tasked to look after a planet that belongs to God, any use of Nature for our own benefit should acknowledge God as its Creator and Owner. Many indigenous peoples across the world have long grasped this truth, although their prayers have sometimes been addressed to the animal or plant they were using, rather than to God the Creator, as Christians are taught to do. Such prayers – often missing around the boardroom tables of large mining or agricultural companies – remind us of our duties as stewards, the importance of taking only what we need, and the two great commandments: to love God and love our neighbour.

“Blest Cross-bearer, Source of good, Light-creating, Word-begot, Gracious child of maidenhood, Bosomed in the Fatherhood, When earth, sea and stars were not.

With Thy cloudless, healing gaze
Shine upon me from above:
Let Thine all-enlightening rays
Bless this meal and quicken praise,
Praise unto Thy name of Love.

Honey's nectar for our use
From the new-made comb is shed:
Which the skilful bee imbues
With thyme's scent and airy dews,
Plying lonely toils unwed.

Orchard-groves now mellowed o'er
Bounteously their fruitage shed:
See! like rain on forest floor
Shaken trees their riches pour,
High-heaped apples, ripe and red.”

– Aurelius Prudentius (358–413), Hymn before Meat, translated by R. Martin Pope, 1905
Wisdom

Stewardship of Nature includes thoughtfully and prayerfully taking what we need for our own use and for the benefit of others. This is implicit in the directive of Genesis 1:28: “have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”

However, also implicit in that directive is the need to wisely manage Nature in order to repair the damage to the environment caused by human activities or natural disasters.

Breeding programs, such as those carried out by some zoos, help to save rare species from extinction. The replanting of shrubs and trees can restore damage caused by erosion or unwise land management. Nest boxes, such as the one on the left, provide homes for birds in recently-planted forests, where the trees are too young to have natural hollows.

National parks help to give people an appreciation of God’s Creation. Managing national parks sometimes requires extinguishing raging forest fires, but sometimes also requires starting fires under controlled conditions in order to avoid more catastrophic fires later.

Knowing what actions need to be taken in order to act as God’s gardeners requires careful study of botany, zoology, ecology, meteorology, geology, and other sciences. Actions taken without such study have often led to environmental problems even worse than the ones they were intended to address – the foolish introduction of rabbits into Australia is only one of many examples.

Part of the “image of God” which human beings have is the intelligence to foresee the consequences of our actions. As the old saying goes, God wouldn’t have given us brains if he didn’t intend us to use them.
Failures of stewardship

There are many ways in which people can fail in their task as stewards of the planet. Damaging creation is the most obvious example. The Bible teaches that plants and animals of no value to us are nevertheless valuable to the God who created them. For this reason, Noah’s ark is described in Genesis 7 as carrying to safety seven of each animal useful to people, but also breeding pairs of every other kind. If all species were worthy of being carried to safety, then exterminating a species can hardly be pleasing to God.

Other forms of damage are also offences against God. Cutting down beautiful trees without a good reason, hiding the stars behind clouds of toxic smog, or polluting rivers and oceans all represent stewardship worse than that of the worthless servant in Jesus’ parable, since he at least refrained from damaging the owner’s estate.

Damaging or polluting Nature also reflects a failure to love other people as we should, since it deprives them of the enjoyment of Nature that God intended for them. Such a failure of stewardship cannot be reconciled with Christian principles.

What is a Christian view of the environment? One which acknowledges God as the Owner and Creator of the Universe, and ourselves as caretakers working on his behalf. One that is not motivated by envy and greed, but by a love for God and for others – including those others yet unborn who will inherit the results of our shortsightedness. For the disturbing aspect of Jesus’ parable is the return of the landowner, and the calling of his servants to answer the question: what did you do with things while you were in charge?
“The world is charged with the grandeur of God. 
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil; 
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil 
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod? 
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod; 
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil; 
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil 
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod. 

And for all this, nature is never spent; 
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things; 
And though the last lights off the black West went 
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs— 
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent 
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.”

– Gerard Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur,” 1918
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