

## The Ecological Spirit: Being Church and Being Creatures

In 2002 the Scottish Executive became so concerned at the environmental unconcern of so many people in Scotland that it sponsored a series of advertising campaigns which were designed to shift peoples' attitudes and awareness. These had a limited success, raising people's preparedness to participate in activities such as recycling from 30% to 40% North of the Border.<sup>1</sup> But it remains the case that Scotland has one of the worst records on recycling of any country in Europe, and, like England, Scottish people remain among the most car dependent people in Europe. I find this particularly troubling because one of the things I love about Scotland is the access that its people have to uninhabited wild space on a scale and of a grandeur which is unique in the British Isles and in much of Northern Europe. For myself I find that regular visits to wilderness are an essential part of my own spiritual life and awareness. I literally cannot live happily in the city for more than six weeks without escaping for a day, or preferably a longer sojourn, to a mountain or a glen, or, my current favourite, a bothy belonging to a friend overlooking the wild beauty of Torridon. Somehow my body and my mind between them have adopted the Scottish landscape – or been adopted by it – so that abstinence from it brings on unease and even sadness. If I cannot actually go there then I find myself meditating on stored mental images of some of my favourite haunts.

The centrality of wild land to the identity of the people of Scotland – despite their predominantly lowland and urban dwelling patterns in the early twenty first century – is clearly attested to in the major piece of legislation on land reform which two weeks ago was given its third reading in the Scottish Parliament, and is soon to become law. The legislation is intended to deal with the fact that Scotland has the most concentrated pattern of land ownership of any country in the world by giving local communities the right to buy rural estates when their owners offer them for sale, and crofters the right to purchase the freehold of their crofts. This remarkable piece of legislation has earned Scotland the dubious accolade of turning itself into the Zimbabwe of Europe according to *Time Magazine* while *The Scotsman* reported the views of Mohammed Al Fayed that the land reform bill was communist in inspiration and character. There have already been a number of buy-outs of land by local communities – the Isle of Eigg, an Estate at Loch Assynt, and most recently the Isle of Gigha – which have in effect pioneered this new movement for rural democracy and community land ownership North of the Border and it was partly the interest that these pioneering projects represented which drew so much public support to the cause of land reform in Scotland. However for all the powerful symbolism of such buy outs, and the new parliament's support of the principle, it remains the case that ecological consciousness in Scotland is among the lowest of any region in Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> *Glasgow Herald*, Sunday, February 1<sup>st</sup>.

I find this odd for I want to believe that proximity to wilderness, and the opportunity to visit it, are key elements in the awakening of ecological awareness, and a shift towards more environmentally benign and ultimately sustainable life styles. The first environmental activist in modern history – John Muir – himself came from Scotland and it was his walks in the Sierra mountains of California which awoke in him a spiritual awe and reverence for wild nature and which led to the founding of the Sierra Club and the establishment of the first National Park. The biography of Rachel Carson indicates a similar story. Carson was the author of the ecologically ground breaking book *Silent Spring* which made the connection between the use of DDT and the loss of wild birds – including the pelican and the eagle – in North America and led to the banning of this particularly persistent chemical in American agriculture. Carson grew up in a rural area and came to love nature through her daily engagement as a child with the forests and rivers which surrounded her house in the rural mid-west. Her career as an ecologically aware biochemist took its rise from these early life experiences.

I wonder how many of us here can reflect on similar grounding experiences of nature as motive for our attendance at a conference like this, and of a larger life commitment to ecological concerns. I suspect quite a number. In my own case I grew up in a house with a large suburban garden and enjoyed frequent walks on the Common lands on the edge of the suburbs, a Common where Charles Darwin first discovered his interest in biology and botany and lived for most of his life when he was not travelling. I also enjoyed cycling along the then relatively untrafficked lands of Northern Kent, and then as a teenager went to boarding school in the heart of the Weald of Kent. As Betjamin has shown metroland was by no means a hostile environment for the development of love of nature and I was lucky enough to find it so.

This line of thought might lead us to believe that among the first conditions for the recovery of an ecological spirit in our culture today is the reconnection of people and the land, and preferably from an early age. When John Muir wanted to persuade Henry Truman of the case for expanding the proposed national park of Yosemite to include areas that logging and mining corporations had in their sites, he invited Truman to spend four days with him in a wilderness hut in the heart of Yosemite. When Truman returned to the White House Muir got his way. Muir clearly saw that if you want to influence policy you have to use nature – and especially wilderness – to change lives, to convert people to your cause. And of course this idea has taken route in a whole raft of nature education and immersion programmes for young people in Britain, America and elsewhere. The most well known in this country is the Outward Bound courses leading to the Duke of Edinburgh Award which are designed precisely to put young people into wilderness situations and teach them both to survive there while at the same time learning to respect, even to love, nature.

But as I said earlier it is clear that engagement with nature, and especially with wilderness, is not a sufficient condition for the recovery of an ecological spirit. This is as equally evident in North America today as it is in Scotland or England. The wilderness movement in North America is large and healthy: millions of Americans regularly hike and fish and hunt and camp and climb and ski and meditate in their extensive wilderness areas but love of wilderness has not translated into environmental policies. Far from it. The United States today, despite its own substantial natural resource wealth, expends considerable energies in securing access to natural resources, including human labour, from right across the globe at prices which are favourable to its corporations and consumers. The impending war in the Gulf is just one, though a particularly graphic and tragic, example of this larger tendency, a tendency which the Bush administration has certainly magnified, though of course it has been a characteristic of American relations with the world beyond its shores for a very long time.

Reflection on matters closer to home though reveal the same point. Over the past fifty years farmers in the cereal growing prairies of Eastern and Central England have mined the soil with the aid of machines and chemicals to the extent that little now grows in or on these factory fields unless the farmer has put it there. Worms, microbacteria, as well as birds and hedgerows have all been eradicated, driven by the forces of an agricultural policy which has put production quantity above everything else. The soil on many of these fields is organically near dead and the combined impact of machines and organic death has made the soil harder and harder to till to the point that it resembles wet concrete. Nature was treated as a machine and as resource to be mined for income; proximity to the land seems to have represented no barrier to this enormous cultural shift in the growing of food and the condition of the soil and of the countryside.

The problem would seem to be that individual contact with nature, what we might call ecological piety, cannot provide the basis for a new ecological order. The truth of the current predicament of the human species is that the collective institutions of the State, corporations, banks, and trade regulators are wedded to a form of civilisation in which human life and civilisation is envisaged in all its essentials as independent of nature. This was clearly illustrated in two events which for me came together on one day last week when the news was full of the tragic loss of one of the American space shuttles. A space scientist declared on a radio debate about the event that this loss was a disaster for humankind – and not just for the families of the astronauts who died – because the needs of humanity were outgrowing the planet's capacity to supply them. According to this astronomer from Birkbeck College in the University of London, only space exploration offers a realistic hope that these needs will be met into the future, through exploitation of mineral and other resources in other worlds. On the same day and on another channel, the BBC reported a severe shortage of wives for young men in a number of states in India. Millions of people in India, it seems, have been taking advantage

of the widespread availability of ultrasound scanning to check on the sex of the foetus in the womb and, if it turns out to be female, the foetus is more often than not aborted. This practice of female foeticide, driven as it is in part by the crippling cost to poor families of providing dowries for their daughters, is an exemplar of the extent to which the technological possibility of shaping human life and destiny independently of nature and natural forces has brought about a situation in which the very survival of humanity in that part of the world is threatened. The domination of nature by technology has created a collective illusion that humans are in control of their own destiny and the destiny of the planet, and it is precisely this illusion which represents the most dangerous threat to human life. Human life becomes more and more subject to natural forces which technology ultimately makes more, and not less, threatening.

The Second World War provoked two theologians, C. S. Lewis and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to reflect critically upon the technological temptation to live independently of nature. In his prophetic essay *The Abolition of Man* Lewis argued that the combined effects of astronomy and chemical agriculture have evacuated divinity from the human view of the earth and the universe. Consequently modern humans look within, to their own inner lives and emotions, for the truth of their existence, and it is the very subjectivity of this search which renders moderns peculiarly vulnerable to totalitarian and technological threats to human flourishing. In the end, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer argued in his reflections on Genesis 1 – 3, *Creation and Fall*, it is because we ‘cease to know the world as God's creation’, that ‘the earth is no longer our earth, and then we become strangers on earth’, and from strangers we finally become earth's subjects: through the power of technology ‘the earth grips man and subdues him’.<sup>2</sup>

If Lewis and Bonhoeffer are correct, and I believe they are, it follows that the first task of the Church in attempting to recover an ecological spirit is to renarrate human life in ways which challenge the dominant world story which teaches us that human life emerged autonomously, without divine intention or imputation, from the chemical gases left behind by the putative big bang of the universe's birth. At the heart of such a renarration is the claim that humans are creatures. And as creatures we find our flourishing not in hubristic assertions of our dominant position at the top of the evolutionary tree of life but in worship and praise for the Creator as the source of life and the end of all our destinies, and in due acknowledgement of our place in the divine order of things.

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<sup>2</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 1 - 3* Eng. trans. (London: SCM Press, 1959), p. 38. And see further Michael S Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

But this claim is notably at odds with most of the attempts to ‘green’ theology and the Church which we have seen in the last thirty years. Theologians have on the whole believed that the answer to the alienation between humans and the planet is to reimagine, reconceive, the relationship between God and creation. The attempt has been made under guises which have included creation spirituality, process theology and various forms of what is called panentheism, to argue for a radical reframing of the Christian understanding of the place of the Creator in the creation. Such radical reframings reach their zenith in claims of some ecofeminist theologians that the world itself is the body of God, even that there is no other God, no other transcendent, than the transcendent beauty of the earth and the universe. Against these deep metaphysical investigations the claim that the heart of the matter is for Christians to recover the reality of their creatureliness may seem rather unambitious. Even church leaders and clergy have not been satisfied with such a seemingly ordinary task. Instead the attempt has been made, most notably in the Ecocongregation project, to turn congregations as organisations with buildings and bank accounts and churchyards into greener organisations. A number of churches have already embraced this greening endeavour in electing to invest in energy conserving measures for the church building, and in changing light bulbs to low energy ones, in planting native species in their churchyards, and in moving investment funds towards ecologically friendly companies. Neither theological nor ecclesiastical move though seems to me to answer the problem as Lewis and Bonhoeffer identify it: if the problem is the hubris of technology and the individualistic quest for meaning within then the answer is much deeper in the culture of modernity than either of these responses indicates that it is. And nothing but a radical challenge to the assumptions of that culture can really be said to represent a true ‘greening’ of a congregation, or a true recovery of an ecological spirit.

But why is the acknowledgement that we are God’s creatures such a radical challenge to modernity? Everything that we imbibe from the culture teaches us that we are as individuals in control of our own destinies, that the choices we make shape and create our destinies. I heard the Prime Minister Tony Blair defend the intended war on Iraq, and the ending of the lives of so many Iraqis, in terms of the defence of the values that we in our civilisation hold dear, and chief among these was individual freedom. The great paradox of democracy of course is precisely that it is hard to hold together the claim that individual liberty is at its heart with the constant demand which the State makes for consent and obedience to its strictures and laws even when these lack rational justification of the kind that can convince a majority of its citizens. Freedom does not seem to be an issue when pharmaceutical corporations gang together and persuade the European Union and individual governments to pass a law banning the sale of vitamins, minerals and herbal preparations. Freedom not to pay taxes to support a 4 billion pound assault on the people of Iraq is also not on offer even for those many pacifists who believe all war is wrong, and that war, and the arms trade, just create more war, and can never

bring peace or security. War is also of course the most ecologically destructive of all human activities. And the impulse to go to war itself is connected with the impulse to dominate nature. It is no coincidence that the Bush administration is notable not only in its preparedness to go to war again and again and again in pursuit of some illusory peace but also for its renegeing on environmental treaty and law both within and beyond the United States. Bush has announced initiatives to tear up legislative protection of old growth forests from loggers, to remove protection from oil drilling of ecologically rich areas such as Alaska, and coastal marshes in Florida and elsewhere, he has announced the ending of energy conservation measures at home, and most famously has rejected the Kyoto treaty on climate change. The aggression which convinces Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld that war is the only way to keep the oil flowing, and keep the terrorists at bay, is the same aggression which drives their systematic assault on the environment at home and abroad.

Part of the problem for us as Christians is that the Church has too often acquiesced in the idea that democracy is essentially Christian, even when modern democracy, at least in Britain and America, is increasingly identified with the completely unchristian idea that the chief end of people is to be free from the needs and demands of other people, and in particular free to consume.<sup>3</sup> The idea of being free from the demands and needs of all species, and even of the planet itself, is only a small extension of that idea. Freedom conceived as living without limits imposed by others is at the heart of the ecological crisis. The point is that this false notion of freedom and the use of violence against other people and other species to achieve human ends are deeply intertwined. And this is because this conception of freedom rests upon a view of humans which regards us as being intrinsically in conflict with one another, and only able to achieve our inevitably diverse and conflicting goals by resisting and challenging the interests of others.

But if individual freedom is not at the heart of human flourishing, what is? For Christians the chief end of human life is of course not to be free from others' demands but quite the opposite. The chief end of humans is to know God and enjoy God forever according to the Westminster Confession, and in this respect it differs hardly at all from the first, and most crucial, of the Ten Commandments first revealed to Moses. Christians are those who believe that the flourishing of individuals and of communities, the possibility of neighbour loving neighbour, and of peace between humans and other species in their dwelling on the planet, rests upon the willingness to acknowledge the foundational demand of Creator to creature to put worship of God before any other goal or end that humans can construct. Far from imputing *more* sacredness to created things the first commandment requires that we treat nothing, no created thing, as so sacred that it

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<sup>3</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom: How the Church is to behave if freedom, justice, and a Christian nation are bad ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991).

comes between us and the command to worship God with our whole being. And when we do acknowledge God above all things, and when we embrace our creaturely responsibility to worship God as our first duty, the Bible declares that we will find that we will then dwell in peace both with one another and with the other species with which we share the planet. The Biblical vision of shalom in which enmity between persons and even between species – such as the lion and the lamb – has come to an end is a vision of a new city in which the lives of all are redirected and redeemed by their common acknowledgement of their duty as creatures to love and worship the Lord and creator of all life.

This vision of shalom is totally at odds with modern culture, and is really incredibly alien to it precisely because it posits the idea that humans achieve their greatest fulfilment not in violently asserting their own power over against the vicissitudes of life on a dangerous planet in a hostile universe, nor that humans are so incredibly diverse that their fulfilment and flourishing varies dramatically from one individual and culture to another. Against these founding myths of our culture the Biblical vision of shalom indicates that our end as creatures is to acknowledge our co-creaturehood with all humanity and all creation and to enjoy our participation in the harmonic chorus of creation's praise.

It is for this reason then that Christians can and must make it clear to the world at large that the fundamental cause of the modern ecological crisis is not at heart a fault of science or technology or economics or management – though these may all be implicated. At heart the ecological crisis is a spiritual crisis. It is precisely this acknowledgement that the ecological crisis is not primarily about managing the earth or even managing democracy which sets deep ecologists and radical greens apart from the more consensual and reformist kind of environmentalist approach. It is this recognition also which marks much of the wilderness movement which I spoke of earlier. But the crucial difference between a Christian understanding of the ecological spirit and a deep green understanding is that for Christians the answer is not to make nature *more* sacred, but for humans to spiritually own their co-creaturehood with the rest of creation. The question that remains is how to do this: what are the implications of this analysis for congregations and Christians who would be green?

Well it is clear that if the ecological crisis is connected with the idolatry of individual freedom, then in gathering together to worship God Christians are already doing the most subversive thing which they can do. Worship above all things involves witness to creaturehood because in worship Christians discover that they are part of a larger narrative that they did not themselves create.<sup>4</sup> In worship Christians confess that they have misused their creaturehood when they acknowledge that they are sinners, and that they are not capable of saving

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<sup>4</sup> Hauerwas, *After Christendom*, p. 109.

themselves, even with all the technological might and managerial excess of the modern State. In the reading and preaching of the Word Christians renarrate the story by which they find their lives enfolded and again are reminded that God, and not humans, is the author of the story. In the exchange of the peace Christians find that the shalom which the Old Testament prophets predicted would come at the end of time is already anticipated and made present through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the midst of the people of God and so are reminded also that it is an exchange which symbolises peace not just between people but the peace of creation. In the sacraments Christians find that the creatures of water, bread and wine become ministers, agencies of Jesus Christ himself who meets us, as he promised, in these sacred elements which represent in worship the whole creation. And in the sacraments Christians find that they are made one with one another and with God, that their destinies are not finally individual destinies but shared, shared with all the people of God and with all the Saints who look for the coming reign of peace. It is from this sacramental vision of community that the idea of the common good – of peoples and of the earth – takes its rise. And as the number of homeless in America and Europe rises inexorably it is evident that democracy and individual freedom have been unable to guarantee the commitment of secular institutions and citizens to the common good of all. And as the number of species on the extinct, and near extinct list, continues to rise, it is similarly evident that democracy and freedom are no guarantors of the common good of the planet either.

So then if we want ecological congregations and Christians to find and express an ecological spirit, to live more ecologically as investors and consumers and voters and activists the remedy is clear and it is worship. And of course not just any old worship will do. Confession of sin should include our sins against creation as well as persons; telling God's story Sunday by Sunday should not only retell the Bible stories and truths but indicate how they challenge and disturb the priorities thrust upon us by democracy and the market; the exchange of peace will refer to the peace of creation as well as of peace between people, and the celebration of the Sacraments will show and tell the ways in which Creation is caught up in the Spirit's making present of Christ in the Eucharistic meal and the waters of Baptism. Hymns, artwork, altar hangings, banners, will also draw on the Creation as source of inspiration and reference in worship and praise. Now congregations which worship like this will also, and perhaps with the aid of the Ecocongregation project, be congregations which do energy and ecological audits of their buildings, lands and investments, engage groups of children and adults in conservation projects and wilderness experiences, and encourage their members to insulate their homes, drive smaller cars, walk or cycle or take the bus when they can, recycle whatever they can and source as much of their food locally as they are able. But let us be clear. The first ecological duty of Christians, the strongest form of witness we can give to the ecological spirit, is to worship God as Creator, and to acknowledge that we share creaturehood with all creation, and so we share also in creation's praise.

But what about the ecological Spirit, with a capital S? Surely, you might say, it is the Spirit who in creation's collective breath is said by the Psalmist to be present everywhere, who must really be at the heart of the recovery of an ecological spirit. And of course I would want to agree with you. But how does the Spirit work this in us? I would say that it is precisely in the Word and in liturgy that we receive training in discerning the presence of the Spirit in creation, and in the movings of the Spirit in our own lives. This for me is another part of the Christian response to those who say that if we go and meditate on wilderness that this in itself will generate an ecological spirit. But supposing the message we take from wilderness is that violent predation is good, or that only the fittest survive, or even that the wilderness is the place above all others for humans to prove their moral and technological prowess over nature, whether speeding in a hi tech catamaran in a round the world race or climbing a Himalayan peak with mobile phones, aluminium ladders and crampons and lightweight oxygen bottles to hand?

In his wonderful *Homilies on the Hexaemeron* St Basil says 'I want to awake in you a deep admiration for creation, until you in every place, contemplating plants and flowers, are overcome by a living remembrance of the Creator'.<sup>5</sup> But we also learn from Basil that Christians learn to do this *through* their enfolding into the great story of creation and redemption which the Church celebrates in its worship, and which is told in the scriptures. Without the guidance of the liturgy and the book of God nature alone, fallen as it is, will not lead us to envision a good and beneficent God as its originator and sustainer. It is only when we read the book of nature and the book of the Word of God side by side that the real inner meaning of creation, and the traces of the presence of the Spirit we may find there, are revealed to us.<sup>6</sup> And this is why of course natural theology is so often problematic, for the assumption that the creation already speaks of God, independently from the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ, has infected the whole enterprise of natural theology for more than two hundred years. We cannot rely on natural science, or even natural theology, to lead us to the meaning of creation for only in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ do we see created order as it is truly meant to be – rescued from the ravages of sin and spiritual death and restored to full relationship, and peace, with the Creator.

And of course it is the Spirit who brings the reality of that 2,000 year old vindication of the Creation into our present reality for it is the action of the Spirit which is supremely evident in the liturgy. When the priest or president invokes the power of the Spirit in the *epiclesis* in the Eucharist, this invocation is paradigmatic for the whole liturgy. Just as the possibility of Christian worship and praise beyond

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<sup>5</sup> St Basil, *Homilies on the Hexaemeron* VI, 1.

<sup>6</sup> See further Theological-Historical Commission for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, *The Holy Spirit: Lord and Giver of Life*, trans. Agostino Bono (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1999), p. 38.

the Jewish Synagogue begins at Pentecost, so it is the Spirit who still makes possible the true worship of the Church today. The Orthodox believe that so real is the presence of the Spirit in the liturgy that time itself stands still in the liturgy and during the time of worship people stop aging – a wonderfully original angle on life extending therapy! In the liturgy also the Spirit of God brings the Word to life. And of course we would say that this action of the Spirit through the Word is not confined to the Church's liturgy even if it reaches its paradigmatic expression there.

The extraordinary claim that we make as Christians then is that it is the same Spirit who brooded over the waters of creation and dwelt in the Incarnate Christ who inhabits the praises and prayers and stories of the people of God. And it is this perception that the creator Spirit who is the source of both the creation and the Church which gives to Christian ecological power such particular poignancy and power. For me this poignancy is nowhere more aptly encapsulated than in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. And it is vital to realise when I read this poem in conclusion that Hopkins was himself deeply formed by the liturgy and the tradition of contemplation on the Word, and spiritual discernment, which he learnt as a Jesuit from the teachings and traditions of Ignatius of Loyola. And of course it was Ignatius who deeply discerned the power of the bodily and material creation, mediated to us through meditation on the life of Jesus Christ using all the five senses, to awaken in us a desire for the love of God. And it was Ignatius also who saw that only through a true spiritual passion for God that our disordered use of created things could be put right:

### **The Grandeur of God**

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 reckon his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge & 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 & with ah! bright wings.