

Eco-theology

St Paul

“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.”

- Romans 8

Is Creation Good?

“Jesus lived in full harmony with creation, and others were amazed: “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?” (*Mt* 8:27). His appearance was not that of an ascetic set apart from the world, nor of an enemy to the pleasant things of life. Of himself he said: “The Son of Man came eating and drinking and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard!’” (*Mt* 11:19). He was far removed from philosophies which despised the body, matter and the things of the world. Such unhealthy dualisms, nonetheless, left a mark on certain Christian thinkers in the course of history and disfigured the Gospel. Jesus worked with his hands, in daily contact with the matter created by God, to which he gave form by his craftsmanship.”

- Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*

Is Creation Good?

“Jesus Christ was a material being. His body was composed of material particles coming from the explosion of stars. His blood was red due to the iron running in his veins. And, like any other mammal, he was hosting a great hidden microbial world (bacteria and other microorganisms) that he carried with him, and without which he could not sustain his life as a human being.”

- Niels Gregersen



Is Creation Good?

“Human persons live in ecological and cultural niches; accordingly, other organisms do not only live in the landscapes around us, but also with us and even as symbionts within our own bodies, from brains to guts. What if Jesus is seen as an extended and inclusive body in this sense?”

- Niels Gregersen



Is Creation Good?

“The Son of God who is eternal born out of the Father, is present as the incarnate Jesus Christ, forever living with and for all other creatures in the universe through the workings of the Holy Spirit. He is not a bygone historical individual on whom we can look back in historical distance but synchronous with each creature in time and co-inherent in all that exists in time and space.”

- Niels Gregersen



Is Creation Good?

“It is essential to maintain a distinction between the eternal life of the Creator who possesses aseity (being in his essential self) and who therefore requires no independent ground of existence, on the one hand, and on the other hand creatures, some of whom, in God's gracious purposes, will be granted an everlasting destiny, but who are at all times totally dependent on the Creator's sustaining will for their continuing existence. Only such a self-existent God can be the ground of an everlasting hope that is wholly independent of whatever may be the present state of the created universe, whose evolving character means that it is inherently subject to change and decay.”

- John Polkinghorne.



Is Creation Good?

“An appropriate understanding of the Creator's presence in and to creation must not blur the difference in ontological status between Creator and creatures for that would jeopardize a vital distinction. Categories singular to deity should not be transferred to creatures. Incarnation is concerned with the conjunction of the divine and the human in the singular instance of Jesus Christ. While I am sympathetic to the need to stress divine presence to the travail of creation, a widened concept of incarnation is not the way to achieve this. In fact, a harsh critic might say that this promiscuous usage carries with it the dangerous whiff of pantheism.”

- John Polkinghorne.



How does our changing understanding of the human being affect our understanding of the incarnation?

What Effect does Sin have on Creation?

This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life.

- Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*.

What Effect does Sin have on Creation?

“We are pushed back to an ultimate basis for the current ecological impasse: the ongoing *disruption* of the basic connectedness with the whole of the universe and with its Creator that the human being has introduced, fueled, and perpetuated. Here we are touching on a deeply mysterious and tragic dimension of human and universal history. The Jewish and Christian traditions call this basic frustration *original sin* or *sin of the world*... *Original* here does not refer to the historic origins of this negative phenomenon and hence to bygone times; rather, it has to do with origins in human beings, their grounding and radical sense of being, today and always. Nor may *sin* be reduced to mere moral dimensions or to an isolated act of the human being. It has to do with an overall stance and hence an overturning of all the relationships in which the human being is placed. This is an ontological dimension... Sin therefore has to do with the human condition today... In their striving to secure life and its reproduction... human beings become organized in a way that is centered on themselves. Anthropocentrism takes root. They make everything—nature, living beings, plants, animals, and even other human beings—serve them... They disrupt the natural kinship with all things... Such self-centeredness does not bring the immortality we desire but rather the disruption of all connections and connectedness... out of fear will utilize power against nature, breaking the covenant of loving peace with it. This is what gives rise to the basic anti-ecological stance, which underlies all the others, nourishing and sustaining them.”

- Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*.

Is it helpful or unhelpful to frame the ecological crisis in terms of sin?

What is the relationship between human and non-human life?

"The very long association between hyenas and humans in Ethiopia ... seems to be related to the fact that the Abyssinians ... 'did not bring radically new ways of managing the landscape, nor did they bring ideologies of extermination.' Hence, while close relationships between hyenas and humans could be sustained, particularly in Ethiopia, in other parts of Africa, hyenas were exterminated ... The different hyena clans occupy different territories in different parts of the town, and enter it through different gates. Hyenas mark the boundaries between clans by pasting, defecating, scratching, and enacting or witnessing behavior over disputed food. Baynes-Rock notes that all these methods are unavailable to the hyenas in Harar ... There was a lot of aggression displayed by both groups but no physical contact. In that way, it was more like a ritualized display in which the two clans were enacting and reasserting the boundary rather than a conflict over a disputable, moveable line of demarcation ... the Argobberi gate 'is a mutually constructed, historicized, politicized, meaningful place in the minds of both hyenas and humans who participate in the dramas which are enacted there.' In the minds of the local people, these spotted hyenas are agents just like humans, for, according to them, 'hyenas hold meetings, make supplications for food, and communicate detailed messages to conspecifics and to humans who can understand hyena language.' They also believe that hyenas will punish conspecifics who attack livestock, and that humans who poison or kill hyenas will, in turn, receive retribution ... Hyenas are also thought to be spiritually powerful animals that are able to mediate messages from the local town saints ... The connection between religious practices and the hyenas understood as agents in a theological drama is also fascinating to me, for it implies that other animals, in some sense, have been mediating agents with the divine."

- Celia Deane Drummond.

What is the relationship between human and non-human life?

“I argue that my evolutionary account has ethical implications, including those that press a case for considering other animals through the lens of inter-morality. I am not simply claiming that some non-human animals engage the world in ways analogous to human morality. Rather, I am arguing that human moral lives are tied up in highly significant ways with those of other animals. In other words, we become moral not only through our interactions with other humans, but also in relation to a wide diversity of other animals, some of whom act in ways that speak of a morality suited to their worlds.”

- Celia Deane Drummond.



What is the relationship between human and non-human life?

"In our day, a new awareness of the magnificence of Earth as a small planet hospitable to life is growing among peoples everywhere. This living planet, with its thin spherical shell of land, water, and breathable air, is our home, our only home in the vast universe. It is also home to a wondrous diversity of species which interact to form networks of living ecosystems. We stand in awe at modern scientific discoveries about the enormous age, size, interrelatedness, and ongoing dynamism of the universe of which life on Earth is a part. On the other hand, we are struck with the terrible knowledge that we humans are inflicting deadly damage on our planet, ravaging its identity as a dwelling place for life. We are late arrivals to the story Darwin tells.... Without losing valuable insights into the grandeur, misery, and salvation of the human condition, theology in our ecological era must broaden its anthropocentric focus for its own adequacy. The human species and the natural world will flourish or collapse together."

- Elizabeth Johnson.

What is the relationship between human and non-human life?

“God created the world by empowering the world to create itself, which is really the story of evolution. God shared the power of creativity with creatures. In the story of evolution, as Darwin tells it, nothing stands alone. Everything is connected. Everything happens in relation to everything that is around. The Spirit of God dwells in all things, and is empowering evolution, is empowering the ongoing development of the cosmos, with infinite patience, and power, and strength, and love. The Spirit of God dwells in the world is within it is empowering it.

Everything dies. This is the suffering and pain and tragedy of the world. We cannot leave suffering out of this story of evolution. This is the cross. Jesus is crucified, is one with human beings and all creatures in their suffering. The suffering and death of Jesus shows that God is with those who suffer with us in our pain and agony. There is a presence of God, in and through that, that can console and comfort and in the end, bring people through with their integrity intact.”

- Elizabeth Johnson.

Can a non-human being be morally good?

What is Creation For?

“According to its greek derivation, the word ecology means the doctrine of the house. What does the Christian doctrine of creation have to do with a doctrine of the house. If we see only a Creator and his work there is no connection. But if we understand the Creator, his creation and the goal of that creation in a trinitarian sense, then the Creator through his Spirit, dwells in his creation as a whole and in every individual created being by virtue of his spirit holding them together and keeping them in life. The inner secret of creation is this indwelling of God, just as the inner secret of the Sabbath of creation is God's rest. If we ask about creation's goal and future, we ultimately arrive at the transfiguring indwelling of the triune God in his creation, which through that indwelling becomes a new heaven and a new earth and at God's eternal sabbath, in which the whole creation will find bliss. The divine secret of creation is the Shekinah, God's indwelling, and the purpose is to make the whole creation the house of God. If this is the theological side of the ecological doctrine of creation, the anthropological side must correspond to it. Existence can only become a home if the relationship between nature and human beings is without stresses and strains – if it can be described in terms of reconciliation, peace and a viable symbiosis. The indwelling of human beings in the natural system of the earth corresponds, for its part, to the indwelling of the Spirit in the soul and body of the human being, which puts an end to the alienation of human beings from themselves.”

- Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* [1985].