ECOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

An introduction with a comprehensive, indexed bibliography

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Abstract

To discuss 'green' issues in Christian theology can no longer be regarded as something rather novel to do. The vast amount of literature included in this bibliography gives a sobering indication of exactly how much energy has been used (and paper has been spent) in the past two decades on writing theological essays and books on environmental issues.

It is, of course, important to ask what this huge theological effort has achieved thus far. In the light of a growing ecological crisis, it seems all too obvious that something needs to be done. It is actually often one of the problems of theological discussions on environmental issues that the imperative 'to do something' is merely and continuously reiterated.

In this contribution a brief attempt is made to indicate some trends in the current debates on ecology within Christian theology, to assess what has been achieved, and to stimulate specifically directed further research. The attached bibliography and index may provide some valuable material for this purpose.

Christian theology and ecology: some tendencies in the debate

1. The debate on Christian theology and the environment was especially stimulated by a famous article by the American historian, Lynn White (1967), who argued that the Christian tradition is at least partly accountable for the present ecological crisis. White's argument, a variation on Weber's famous thesis, emphasised the (negative) influence of Christian religion on society and the environment. This tendency can be illustrated as follows:
White's article led to a heated debate. Christian theologians tried with lengthy arguments to refute his thesis by arguing that the Christian tradition, as a whole, should in fact be regarded as 'green'. The Bible is 'green', 'God is green', and several important figures in the Christian tradition (St Francis of Assisi, Hildegard of Bingen and others) were also 'green'. This defence of the Christian tradition forced White to retract somewhat on his original thesis. It remains, however, a question as to what the value of this debate eventually was - besides helping some Christians coping with any continued feelings of guilt.

In the more recent, and somewhat similar, 'ecofeminist' debates the influence of the Christian religion on the environment is again questioned from a specifically feminist perspective. It is argued that the domination of males over females in the Western (Christian?) tradition has historically been extrapolated in the form of a dominance over and an exploitation of nature. This lively discussion is presently being continued (see the index for references).

2. In another aspect of Christian theological discussions on environmental issues, the possible positive contribution of the Christian tradition to the present ecological crisis is emphasised. The emphasis is again put on the (possible) influence of religion and theology on society and the environment, but the question mark is substituted by an exclamation mark:

Christian Religion ----> The environment !!

The theological contributions dealing with environmental issues from this perspective are exceptionally extensive. Different aspects can be identified:

In the most basic form of argument, Christian theologians usually describe the extent of the environmental crisis and then state emphatically that something must be done about it! This imperative is usually substantiated with lengthy overviews of the extent of the environmental crisis which clearly illustrates the obvious - i.e. that, indeed, something needs to be done (and that Christians should be the first to make some kind of contribution).

This obvious imperative could also be substantiated from Christian theological considerations. The same arguments used to refute White's thesis can be used in this regard as well. Christians should do something about the environmental crisis, 1) because it is a biblical imperative (see the exegetical material), 2) because 'God is green' (see Bradley 1990), 3) because the church in its lengthy tradition has been and should be green, 4) because Christian symbols (e.g. the Sabbath, creation, the sacraments, Christian love, etc.) has a green appeal, etc. (see the index for references).

These theological exhortations do have an important symbolic function. They make it clear that environmental issues should have a priority on Christian agendas. This has also been the value of the programme for Justice, Peace
and the Integrity of Creation initiated by the World Council of Churches (see index for references). This programme indicates some degree of ecumenical consensus and sets a clear agenda for the present role of the church in society. It also recognises the very close relationship between the issues of (economic) justice, (political) power struggles and environmental issues.

It must be emphasised, however, that a vast amount of theological literature falls into the trap of either merely reiterating the imperative that something needs to be done, or illustrating the ecological value of the Bible and the Christian faith again and again.

3. The need to go beyond merely stating these imperatives led to many Christian attempts to spell out the practical implications of an involvement in environmental issues. Various different levels of involvement in environmental issues can be discerned.

The first and obvious level of involvement is that of praxis, i.e. dealing with the question of what should be done to restore the ecological balance (and not only that it should be done).

Christian contributions on the topic of a new environmental praxis often begin by again stressing the need that something ought to be done. It then explains the responsibility of Christians in this regard and continues to give some practical guidelines for local churches and individual Christians for environmental actions. Literature of this kind usually attempts to provide a sound biblical and theological basis for such environmental praxis but the guidelines are often somewhat superficial or are simply too vague to stimulate practical application. The numerous paperbacks on the ABC of a (Christian) green lifestyle are, on the other hand, often very practical but lack theological depth. These practical guidelines are also often developed from the perspective of a more affluent society which can afford to use less energy, to use one example. It is also important to remember that it is the poorer communities which usually experience the ecological problems surrounding water and air pollution, soil erosion, etc, problems which they do not necessarily cause.

Another important problem pertaining to this kind of literature on a Christian environmental praxis is that it seldom, if ever, takes economic realities into account. The practical suggestions are limited to the level of individual or church efforts. It would be unwise to reject the value of these contributions. They do, at least, play an important role in stimulating and developing environmental values. However, without a more comprehensive strategy which takes the modern industrial economy seriously and which provides economically viable solutions, the influence of these contributions will remain limited to peripheral spheres of society.

There is clearly a need for extensive further research, especially on the relation between Christian faith and environmental economics. From a Third World perspective the complex issues surrounding development and the environment is of special importance. Further research also needs to be done on
environmental politics, third generation human rights and the Christian tradition (see index for some references).

Christian contributions which do attempt to relate to economic, developmental and political debates on the environment ranges from protest literature to theologically justified political and economic manifesto's for a green revolution. These contributions are again often economically superficial and provide no viable economic alternatives. It has become clear that it is not at all clear what a specifically Christian involvement in environmental issues should entail. That something should be done seems obvious, but there exists a conflicting plurality of agenda's, strategies, policies and solutions in economic and political debates on these issues, ranging from capitalist environmental solutions, to socialist policies, to pleas for a completely new economic world order. These differences are reflected in theological literature on these issues as well.

4. The impasses and lack of progress often present in these debates on an appropriate environmental praxis has led to a plea for a different kind of involvement in environmental issues. It is argued that we will not change our praxis unless our spiritual attitude towards nature is changed as well. There has therefore developed a widespread interest in 'green' spiritualities. These green spiritualities all emphasise the importance of a harmonious relationship between human beings and nature. Some of these green spiritualities also call for a reverence or even worship of nature. A plea for a sacramental understanding of nature and a sacramental form of involvement in ecological issues is also made. In the South African context the very practical contributions of Daneel (1991, 1992) in this field have become well known.

It should also be noted that there is a growing consensus that Christian missionary work should include an important emphasis on environmental concerns (see McDonagh 1986, 1991). This concern is reflected in theological reflections on the Christian mission in the world.

5. The environmental crisis has not only led to the claim that Christianity could and should make an important contribution to a more adequate relationship with the environment. The ecological crisis has also led to a critical reassessment of some core elements of the Christian faith.

?? Christian Religion ← The Ecological crisis

This is perhaps a very important and sobering development. Christian theologians usually do acknowledge that Christian attitudes towards nature has been far from innocent in the history of the Christian tradition (especially in the Western World). However, it is usually argued that this is a serious aberration from biblical and Christian thinking on the environment. Although this is certainly the case, there is an unhelpful tendency to merely justify the Bible and the Christian faith in the process.
It is important to deal not only with the implications and contributions of Christianity within the ecological crisis but to also consider the implications which the ecological crisis may have for Christianity. Christian thinkers have, in fact, done a lot of research in an attempt to evaluate and reformulate the meaning of the core symbols of the Christian faith - including Trinitarian theology, Christology, pneumatology, soteriology, hamartology, eschatology, ecclesiology, sacramental theology, creation theology and cosmology (see the index for references).

These efforts should be welcomed. It is especially important to discuss the environmental dimensions of Christian soteriology. How, for example, does the present ecological crisis relate to a Christian understanding of sin? In what way does a Christian understanding of salvation extend to the whole of creation and how does the 'new earth' of Christian eschatology relate to this earth? What are the ecological implications of confessional differences on the axiom of *gratia non tollit sed perficit naturam?*

If Christian theology would like to make a contribution to environmental thinking some clear guidelines on these issues need to be developed.
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This bibliography is by no means comprehensive. There are many other similar bibliographies (see the last section in the index). This bibliography (and especially the index) focuses on the various themes within Christian theology. It wishes to stimulate and direct further research on these themes.


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