

BIBLICAL TRADITIONS AND THE INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT DEBATE.

© Margaret Barker

Geneva 2007

The Bible is an enormously rich and complex collection of religious texts, divided into two sections. The older and larger section is the Hebrew Scriptures, which Christians call the Old Testament, and which they share with Jews. The newer and smaller section belongs only to Christians and they call it the New Testament. It is impossible to understand the teaching of Jesus in the New Testament without understanding the imagery and symbolism of the Old Testament and of the Jewish culture in which Jesus grew up. In this respect, Jewish and Christian beliefs about the environment - the Bible would call it the creation - are very similar.

There are, however, several large groups within Christianity who have different histories and have thought differently about fundamental matters. Even though they have a common heritage, they interpret the Bible differently. It is important to be aware of these major groups within the Church, and the countries where they are deep rooted, because the differences in their teaching can affect environmental matters. Artificial birth control, for example, is not a problem for most Protestant Christians, but is forbidden by the Catholic Church. There is no clear teaching in the Bible about this; it is a matter of custom and tradition.

There was a division in the Church in the fifth century CE, when the Christians who now form the oriental Churches began to develop their own characteristic traditions. There was major division in 1054CE, when the community now called the Orthodox Church separated from the community now called the Catholic Church, and about 400 years after that, there was another major division within the Catholic Church. In northern and central Europe, in the 15th and 16th centuries, a new movement arose that became the Protestant Church. One of its great centres was here in Geneva. The Protestant Church put the greatest emphasis on the Bible, and pioneered translating the Bible into modern languages so that people could read it for themselves. From this there arose many opinions as to the exact meaning of the texts. John Calvin, for example, the great Protestant leader here in Geneva, looked carefully the Bible texts and concluded that, under certain circumstances, Christians could lend money at interest. The Old Testament forbids this. It was, he said, like

charging rent for property. Charity and justice had to be the key concerns, and so it was wrong to lend money at interest to the poor, and the borrower should make as much from the arrangement as the lender. All employment and business should be, ultimately, for the good of society as a whole. [This is why Protestant culture is associated with capitalism]

Some who studied the Bible very closely became known as Evangelicals, and their emphasis on Bible teaching had considerable influence. William Wilberforce and his friends who campaigned two hundred years ago for the abolition of slavery were Evangelical Christians who were prepared to confront all the arguments of merchants and economists, and maintain that slavery was simply wrong, and that everything based on it had to change. This is how they understood the Bible. It is the spiritual heirs of these people who campaign today for the cancellation of debt and for greater aid to people in need, in whatever form that aid may take. The Catholic priests who worked to empower the poor of South America - a movement known as Liberation Theology - were also in this tradition. The Church leaders in Rome were initially suspicious of their work because it seemed to be a form of Communism, but shared ownership was part of the original Christian ideal. Social justice, which cannot be separated from environment justice, has always been part of Christian teaching.

Within the 19th century Evangelical communities there arose the Pentecostals, a movement that grew dramatically from the beginning of the 20th century and spread from its home on the west coast of America. Pentecostal Churches are now an important influence in South America, especially in Brazil, in Africa, in Korea, and all over the world. Many of these Bible based Christians emphasise the Day of Judgement, when the Lord will return to judge the earth and establish the Kingdom of God. The problem is that the Bible is not entirely clear as to how this will happen. Will the fire of the Day of Judgement destroy everything so that the Lord can create a new heaven and a new earth, or will the fire of the Day of Judgement only destroy evil, so that earth is renewed? If you believe that the whole creation will be destroyed at the Judgement, and that the Day of Judgement grows nearer as wickedness increases on the earth, you will have no concern to protect the environment, since this is destined for destruction. Large numbers of Christians throughout the world have been thinking like this, and it is a matter of urgency for biblical scholars to show that this is not the only way to interpret the Bible. Christians who think in this way cannot be persuaded to act on environmental matters.

The Bible is very clear what Jesus taught about the day of Judgement. Each person will have to answer one question: how did you care for people in need? Did you feed the hungry and provide shelter for the homeless? Did you care for the sick and clothe the naked? (Matthew 25.31-46). Those who cared for others were caring for the Lord himself, and those who refused to help had rejected Him. They would face the fire of the Judgement. People who are not inclined to take action because the Day of Judgement is near are now beginning to say, however, that if we do not act, and climate change makes it impossible for some people to grow food for themselves, then we are failing to care for our neighbours and so will be found guilty.

In the Book of Revelation, there is a vivid prophecy of the Day of Judgement. The seventh angel blows his trumpet, and the voices in heaven cry out that the time has come for the dead to be judged, and for 'destroying the destroyers of the earth' (Rev. 11.18). I have never seen this passage cited in the debate about Christian attitudes to the environment, and yet it is the clearest example I know of the original Church's view. Before the Kingdom of God could be established on earth, the destroyers of the earth had to be destroyed. In other words, there is no place in the Kingdom of God for those who destroy the creation.

For most of the 2000 years since the time of Jesus, however, Christians have not made a special study of the creation. It was only in the middle of the twentieth century that Christians began to look carefully at their own tradition, largely as the result of criticism from outside.

In 1963, Rachel Carson published the book which marks the beginning of the modern environmental movement: *Silent Spring*. The swinging sixties - as that decade was called - told us we had never had life so good, that we were free, and yet an ominous menace was brooding over the party. Nuclear weapons might never be used, but the inexorable spread of pollution was already destroying the earth. As people became more concerned about the state of the environment, so they began to reflect on how this had happened. What human choices and ideals had brought the world to such a state?

Forty years ago, in 1967, Lynn White published an article that blamed Christianity. ‘The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis’¹ he said, lay in the teachings of Christianity and especially of Protestant Christianity. Even in a society that had largely abandoned the religious element in Christianity, he argued, the older thought patterns had remained. These patterns had left unquestioned the idea that human beings were the masters of the creation, made in the image of God, and that there would be perpetual progress towards a wonderful future. The earth and its resources had been created for us humans to use, and modern western science and technology had grown up in this setting. Lynn White concluded: ‘Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. We must rethink and re-feel our nature and destiny.’ What he said was widely challenged and in many cases shown to be inaccurate and unfair. But it did start us thinking.

Christian leaders today are emphasising that the environment problem is not one of technology and science; it is spiritual. Pollution and degradation which have such devastating effects on the earth are the symptom of the human spiritual condition, of human attitudes. Something has gone seriously wrong with the way human beings see their place in the world. They are no longer comfortable in the environment that they have themselves made. Instead of being made in the image of God, they have created a new image for themselves that does not satisfy, and an ethos that has distorted the whole world. If everyone had the lifestyle and consumption of New York, we are told, we should need five planets; but we have only one.

The leader of the Orthodox Church, Patriarch Bartholomew, has been drawing attention to this spiritual crisis for many years, especially through his international symposium Religion, Science and the Environment. The Pope also spoke of this in his inauguration sermon in April 2005: the external deserts in the world are growing, he said, because the internal deserts have become so vast. The Venice Declaration, signed by the Patriarch and Pope John Paul in June 2002, gave this guidance for all Catholic and Orthodox Christians:

- Respect for the creation stems from respect for human life and dignity.
- Christians and all other believers have a specific role to play in proclaiming moral values and in educating people in ecological awareness.

¹ Science 155 (1967)

- The problem is not simply economic and technological; it is moral and spiritual. A solution at the economic and technological level can only be found if we undergo, in the most radical way, an inner change of heart that can lead to a change in lifestyle and of unsustainable patterns of consumption and production.

Where are we now? We are consumers. Consuming is the new universal religion. Economies are based on ever-increasing consumption. Human status and achievement are measured in how much a person consumes. Since we now face an environmental crisis, the advertising industry now promotes ethical consumption. This implies that the failure of governments to act can be offset by changing our shopping habits. Green consumerism is now a sign of social status in England. I have not yet seen an advertising campaign in my wealthy country that encourages shoppers to stop shopping, to stop consuming, to downsize from greed to need. Is this our nature and destiny as human beings? For Christians, this would mean changing our status from being citizens of heaven to being consumers of the earth.

And yet green consumerism can be a force for good. Supermarkets watch closely what their customers buy, and provide what they want. That is how they stay in business. Politicians, in a democracy, watch what their voters want, and should reflect this in their policies. The leaders are in fact the followers. People are more aware than ever before of the state of the earth, and the established networks of faith communities, with their teaching roles, are an effective channel for communication. Religions also appeal to the hearts of their followers, and it is the heart that influences how people think. What seem to be rational choices are in fact based on underlying beliefs and assumptions.

Embedded deep in any Christian or post Christian culture are certain ideas and symbols, for example, that human life is sacred, special, different from the life of other animals. This is a universal assumption in a Bible based culture [and in many others, but I am thinking here only of Christianity]. There are debates as to how this fundamental belief should be applied: is the life of an unborn child sacred? Is the life of a terminally ill person sacred? Are there some crimes for which there should be capital punishment? At various periods in Christian history, this belief in the sacredness of human life has been differently applied; when I was a child in England, murderers were hanged, and there was no abortion. Now there is no capital punishment, but unborn children

are killed in their thousands. Without the fundamental belief in the sacredness of human life, however, there would be no debate.

Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden are where our thinking about the creation begins. There is the story of the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of good and evil, and the talking snake who tempted Eve to take the forbidden fruit. Since the Old Testament was written in a pre-philosophical culture, its insights are expressed in pictures, symbols and stories. These pictures and stories are embedded in Christian culture, and can be found in our art, our literature, and, most of all, in our assumptions. These stories and symbols must be understood on their own terms, and not read literally. The truth of the Bible is not found by reading the texts with 20th century eyes, but in trying to glimpse what the original writers were saying. The story of Adam and Eve and the creation is not simply history - the story of how the world began. It is a parable that explains the current state of the world. Adam means every human being. Adam's disobedience is the story of every human being. There was a saying in the time of Jesus: 'Each person has been the Adam of his own soul.'

The Bible begins with the story of how God created the world and saw that it was good. Here are two fundamentals: that the world was no random accident, and that it was intended to be a good and beautiful place. There is a Creator, and the creation belongs to him. One of the best known psalms - the hymns sung in the Jerusalem temple - begins: 'The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and those who live there.' (Ps.24.1). The creation was established with wise laws and statutes, and so everything that the ingenuity of the human mind can discover about the world is part of an existing created system. All knowledge is knowledge of God. Human beings do not make the systems and the rules; they discover them, and have to work within them. Nor do human beings own what they discover; the very idea of patenting natural processes raises important questions. For practical reasons, they have to be patented to protect their commercial value, and here we see for the first time the conflict of ideals.

Jesus said that no one can serve two masters; you cannot serve God and Money (Matthew 6.24). Morality and Economics are the real clash of cultures in our present situation. It does not make economic sense to keep old people alive when they are no longer contributing to the economy, or to support the sick and the disabled. But we do. We recognise that there are other values. At the

moment we apply these values to human society, but the time has come when we have to think about applying these values to the creation as a whole. Are some things simply wrong? Is the creation sacred too?

The Bible story says that the creation was completed in six days. There have been many controversies over this: should it be understood literally or symbolically? We cannot be certain, but what is certain is that the ancient Jews and later the Christians believed that the story of creation had to be represented in their place of worship. It took Moses six days to erect the tent for worship in the desert, and this corresponded to the six days of creation. The pattern of the great temple in Jerusalem was the same. This means that the temple represented the creation and the creation was the true temple. Just as the temple was sacred and the place where God was worshipped, so too the whole creation was sacred and the place where God was worshipped. To pollute the creation with human sin was as wicked as polluting the temple itself.

Creation was not sacred in the sense that it was full of spirits who were worshipped and given offerings. It was sacred because it had been created by God. The Old Testament has many poems about the glory of the creation, and about its mysteries. The Book of Job emphasizes that a man, no matter how clever he may be, cannot fully understand the ways of the Creator. The Psalms call on the whole creation to praise God: the heavens and the earth, trees, animals and human beings, all of them should praise their Creator (Psalm 148). When the prophet Isaiah had his vision in the temple, (Isaiah 6), he heard the angels singing that the Lord was Holy, and that the whole earth was full of his Glory.

Unfortunately, the creation has ceased to be sacred in much of western Christianity. There has been a suspicion that such attitudes were pagan and incompatible with Christianity, and to establish a Christian world view, it was necessary to overcome pagan superstitions. Lynn White identified this as one of the major changes that led to Christian culture exploiting the creation. He was not completely accurate in his accusation, but this is how the situation was perceived.

It was argued that Adam was created last of all the creatures because the rest of creation had been made ready for him. Natural resources, because they were just there, were deemed to be there for the taking. They were free. They did not have to be paid for. The cost of a product was the cost of

the labour that produced it, but the resources of the earth were free. This assumption is now being challenged, and there is talk of ecological capital and ecological services that have to be paid for. The cost of maintaining ecological systems has to become part of the cost of any business that benefits from them. Those who benefit from the rainfall generated by great forests should contribute to the real cost of keeping those forests. The cost of pollution should be borne by the polluter. How would this be calculated? I have no idea, but those who protest at the felling of trees because they will suffer from the consequences must recognise that as we all share one planet, we are all responsible for its one great system of creation. This is real globalisation. Shared responsibility.

The Old Testament imagines the creation as one great system held in place by covenant bonds. Everything - the natural world and human society - was bound into one great system called the eternal covenant. The Creator established rules for human life, and when those rules were broken, the bonds of the covenant were broken. The prophets had terrifying visions of what would happen if too many bonds were broken; the whole of creation would collapse. Human actions, they said, could destroy the creation. The prophet Isaiah composed a lament for the dying creation (Isaiah 24): the heavens and the earth were mourning and withering away because they had been polluted - and he does use that word polluted - by human sin. People had broken God's laws, ignored the statutes that had established the creation and so had broken the everlasting covenant. The prophet Jeremiah said that the earth would collapse into chaos because people were skilled in doing evil and did not know how to do good (Jeremiah 4). The nightmare descriptions in the Bible that are represented in Christian art try to picture the destruction of the creation. They are called apocalypses. That word has been taken over by film makers and given a slightly different meaning, but originally it meant the revelation, the vision, of what could happen to the world.

On the sixth day God created a human being, Adam 'in the image of God'. What did that mean? The Jews condemned any 'image of God' in the sense of a physical image, an idol, and so we have to look for the meaning in the story as a whole. One interpretation was that Adam 'made the image of God' means that human life is sacred. Another interpretation was that we can give nothing as an offering to God - who needs nothing - and so we give to our fellow human beings, to the image of God. Another interpretation is that the human being is a creator, just as God is the Creator. God made the world as a good and beautiful place, and so the human being has to share in this work.

The human is not just the passive recipient of the wonders of creation: Adam shares in the work. In the time of Jesus, people believed that the six days of creation symbolised six eras of history, meaning that the sixth day when Adam was created was the human era. At the end of that sixth day, when God and Adam had worked together, God saw that everything was very good, and then rested. It was the Sabbath day. This was the goal of creation; that everything should be very good, and that there should be rest.

What does this tell us about the human as a creator and modifier of the creation? When Jesus healed a blind man on a Sabbath day, he was accused of breaking the Sabbath law, and working on the day of rest. He replied that God was still working and he was working with him (John 5.17), meaning that the true Sabbath had not yet come. The whole creation was not very good while there was a blind man to be helped and healed. The problem is the nature and purpose of human intervention in the creation. How should the image of God use those creative powers? What is the vision towards which we work? More money? More material goods? More power? Or is it the biblical vision of the Kingdom of God?

And what does the Sabbath rest tell us about the human as a consumer? The world was not made in seven days but in six. Enough was enough. Rest was part of the system: maximum production was not. The English word 'holiday' was originally 'holy day', because the day of rest was sacred. Those who worked with God had to achieve the state where everything was very good and at rest. Christians call this the Kingdom of God, a concept to which I shall return. Progress is not the same as growth. There is no place in the biblical vision for growth without limit, with no end in view other than the process of growth itself. Observing the Sabbath, knowing when to stop and what was good, was the original goal, and Adam, the human being, worked with God in the process of creation. Jesus told a parable about a rich man who planned bigger and better ways to store his wealth. Then he died and could enjoy none of it. Better, said Jesus, to have your treasure in heaven (Luke 12).

The creation story says that Adam, the human, was to bear fruit, multiply and fill the earth, to subdue it and have dominion over other living creatures (Gen.1.28). These words describe the role of human beings in the creation, and there have been great debates over their meaning. Do they mean that the natural resources of the earth can be used freely? Does the Bible say that human

beings can use the earth as they wish? These interpretations have never been part of the biblical tradition - there are severe warnings against such an attitude - but they did appear when people rejected the biblical picture as a whole and kept only those elements that seemed useful to their own purposes. One idea they kept was ruling the earth - as they understood that idea - but the idea of restraint and moderation disappeared.

If we look at the original Adam story, his 'dominion' over the living creatures is like that of King Solomon (1 Kings 4.24), who ruled in peace over all his lands. 'Dominion' (radah) does not imply anything harsh or exploitative. Nor does 'subdue', the other word used to describe Adam's role. The Hebrew word [kabash] means to bind or to harness, and so Adam had to use the forces of the creation to promote his peaceful rule. The Psalms also show what was meant by Adam's rule over the creation. When people looked up to the sky and the stars, they realised just how small they were, and how amazing it was they had been entrusted with the care of the earth (Psalm 8). 'What is the son of Adam that you should care for him... and have made him ruler [mashal] over the works of your hands?' It was only the humble person, the servant of God, who was fit to rule the earth.

There is a second creation story in the Bible, which also describes the role of Adam. The language is different, but the picture is the same. Adam was put into the Garden of Eden, 'to work the land and to preserve it'. He was God's representative to care for the land and to preserve it. It is interesting that the Hebrew word used for 'working' the land can also mean 'serving'. Adam was to be a faithful servant of the earth - not its master in any sense that implied exploitation. The word 'steward' is often used to describe Adam's role: he had to care for the earth as the representative of the Creator who had entrusted the creation to his servant. The unfaithful servants were those who would face the Judgement because they had destroyed the earth.

The story of the Garden of Eden explained how the beautiful creation became a place of work and pain, a place of dust, thorns and thistles. The problem was the use of knowledge and Adam's attitude to it. There were many trees in the Garden, and Adam was told that he could eat from any except the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. In the centre of the Garden was the Tree of Life, and he could eat from that - but not from the forbidden tree. A snake tempted Adam's wife Eve, and she took some of the forbidden fruit and gave it to her husband. They both ate, and were

punished by the Lord. They were driven from the Garden and prevented from eating the fruit of the Tree of Life. They were condemned to a life of work and pain, because they had disobeyed the Lord's commandment and had taken a type of knowledge that was forbidden.

This is a very subtle story, and one of great relevance to our present situation. It is about knowledge and ways of knowing. The Tree of Life, according to the Bible, gave one type of knowledge, which was called wisdom. Wisdom brought true wealth, long life, honour, gentleness and peace (Proverbs 3.13-18). This was the Tree that the Creator had intended for human beings. This was the knowledge they needed to care for the creation and to serve it. Instead, they were tempted by Satan - always described in the Bible as the great deceiver - to ignore the Creator and to choose the forbidden tree. The knowledge of good and evil means knowledge that can be used for good or evil, and the human pair chose to have their own way, chose the possibility of doing evil, without knowing why this tree had been forbidden. They then discovered they could no longer eat from the tree of life because the way was barred by an angel. They were driven from the Garden of Eden into another part of the earth where life was hard and the soil was poor. There was pain, and there was death. Adam and Eve had chosen the wrong way of knowing, and brought upon themselves a great curse: 'You are dust and to dust you shall return.'

This story of the Garden of Eden says that the world was changed from a good and beautiful place by human choice. They chose to disobey the command of the Creator, and to have instead the freedom to use knowledge as they wished. The story is very subtle, with many profound insights woven into an apparently simple tale.

First, the snake was Satan the deceiver, who told them that if they chose the forbidden tree, their eyes would be opened and they would become like God. That was a tempting offer, and they took it. They then discovered the truth. The fruit of that tree did not make them like God; it made them mortal; they died and returned to dust.

Second, we are told that Adam had been made from dust, and at that stage he just existed. Then the Lord God breathed into him and made him live; he had a different quality of life. After Adam had chosen to eat from the forbidden tree, he lost that quality of life and returned to mere existence; 'dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return.' The forbidden knowledge led Adam to the state that

nowadays we call reductionism or materialism. The human is no more than his material body. The human has no breath of life from God. The human is just another animal, cleverer, perhaps and more ruthless, but, in the end, just a creature of dust.

Third, the snake, the great deceiver, made knowledge without the restraint of obedience seem attractive. Humans could be their own gods, make their own rules, do things their own way. This is a very modern attitude. One of the great movements in European thought was the Enlightenment, when the scholars and thinkers of Europe, wearied by the religious wars that had torn the continent apart for a generation, decided to break free from the constraints of religion and pursue knowledge for its own sake. Such freedom had a price. There is no such thing as knowledge that is free from values and assumptions, and knowledge that recognises no moral restraints is very dangerous indeed. When the only consideration is: Can we afford it? Can we create a market for it and make a profit? we are on a dangerous path.

I read this week in the Guardian [a left of centre UK newspaper, 26.07.07] a piece about ‘cut throat and dodgy global financiers’, who offer the attractive message of rapid development, free from all the difficult restraints of human rights and democracy. The regimes that complain least about ‘morality’ are the ones that secure the lucrative contracts. The clash of cultures is indeed between Morality and Economics. You cannot serve God and Money

And last, the Tree of Life, the symbol of Wisdom and knowledge well used, appears in the last chapter of the Bible, in St John’s vision of the Kingdom of God. After the great Judgement, when the earth is renewed and there is no more pain and death, the faithful eat from the Tree of Life. The Tree bears its fruit all through the year, and its leaves are for healing the nations of the world. The Christian vision of the Kingdom of God is the restoration of the Garden of Eden, the creation restored to the state that God intended before the corruption caused by choosing to eat from the forbidden tree, the knowledge of good and evil..

The Tree of Life fed the faithful with its fruit and also anointed them with its oil. The oil that anointed the ancient prophets, priests and kings, and eventually gave Christians their name [Christian means ‘anointed’], was oil from the Tree of Life. There are many lovely legends and traditions about this, but the teaching is clear: anointing transformed your mind and made you think

differently. The prophet Isaiah said that anointing gave wisdom, understanding, counsel, power, knowledge and the fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11.2). Anointing enabled you to see things differently. It changed your mind. You were able to think differently. The information and skills you acquired were no longer knowledge but Wisdom, the gift of the Tree of Life.

And Wisdom was defined as 'joining all things together' or 'holding all things in harmony'. This was the way of knowing intended for those who cared for the earth. It is a fundamental Christian concept, and one that our teachers and preachers must emphasise far more than they do. St Paul said this was the first characteristic of Christian action; to set the whole creation free from 'bondage to decay.' The whole creation, he said, was going nowhere, it was in a state of futility (Romans 8.20), the state that Adam had caused through choosing the wrong tree. The anointed ones would renew the creation by setting it free.

That is the vision of the Kingdom of God, and the best known of all Christian prayers asks just this: Thy Kingdom Come. The first Christians were in no doubt that the Kingdom meant material prosperity; the vines would produce huge crops and the wheat would yield fine flour. There would be no more pain. But Kingdom implies rule, government, and the Bible is clear that this vision can only be realised by good and firm government. It was the duty of a king to establish justice and righteousness, not only for his people but for the whole creation. Righteousness in the biblical sense, means 'putting things right', 'restoring'; and justice is whatever is necessary to redress the balance and restore the creation. The result is 'peace' in the biblical sense of integrity, wholeness and balance.

From this, it will be clear that much of 'the West' has lost its Christian values and sold out to Money. We have exchanged a vision of Wisdom for an economy based on secular knowledge, and the results are clear for all to see.