

Ecotheology and the United Methodist Church

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Abstract

Despite its conservative reputation, Christianity has much to offer the environmental movement. This paper explores how the relationship between humans, nature and God has evolved in Christian theology. Specifically, it documents the trend towards an ecotheology that holds the creation in high regard. It then examines the United Methodist Church in particular and how the Church's doctrines, structure and heritage influence its position on environmentalism. Interviews with leaders in the Church provide practical examples of how the principles of ecotheology are being carried out. The UMC and churches in all denominations have great potential to aid in resolving the current environmental crisis, and they are hopeful that through more ecological-centered values positive change will occur.

Introduction

Few are the skeptics who deny that our planet is in the midst of an environmental crisis, be it pollution, climate change, species loss or depletion of natural resources. The environmental movement in the U.S. grew from the work of secular activists in the 1960s and 1970s who criticized the toxic pollution released in the air and water.¹ The movement soon spread to religious institutions as well, and today discussion of the environment in some form is almost ubiquitous in secular and religious arenas.

Religion has much to offer the environmental movement, not least because religion and environmentalism are similar. Environmentalism depends on people's sense of connection with nature, a feeling that is often spiritual.² They both shape people's values and ethics to be conscious of how their actions affect others, and to behave in a "good" way for the benefit of

¹ Gottlieb, 8.

² Gottlieb, 152.

everyone.³ Both give us “a new way to think about how we ought to live, offering an alternative to values based only in fame, money [or] power.” Religion and environmentalism make serious demands for people to change their own lifestyles and to challenge and improve society.⁴

This paper examines the role Christianity, specifically the United Methodist Church (UMC), plays in the U.S. environmental movement. We will see how Christian theology has evolved to include creation in a new ecotheology and how the UMC is putting this ecotheology into action. Christians are optimistic that they can instigate real change in our society’s relationship to nature.

Changing Perceptions of Nature

Christianity is a dynamic religion. Despite a reputation for traditionalism, the Church as a whole has constantly changed to reflect the society of the time. With it, the Christian view of nature and its relationship with humanity has evolved. Theologians identify three major periods in Christian environmental thought: medieval, Renaissance and modern.⁵

In the medieval picture, nature was created for the enlightenment of people—“a way God had chosen to lead humans into the divine presence.” Christians sought God in nature rather than through introspection. Natural signs were to be read like a book, and in order to understand it humans had to live in close relationship to nature. Thus, allegorists gave human traits to animals to teach virtues, and many plants are named after parts of humans or other animals.⁶ This relationship did not mean that medieval people did not cause environmental degradation.

³ Norcross.

⁴ Gottlieb, 160-2.

⁵ Sarkar, 2.

⁶ McFague, 53-5.

Because they were created in God's image and nature was for them to use, humans had inestimable value while nature in itself had very little.⁷

The most renowned Christian environmentalist of this time, perhaps of any, is Francis of Assisi. Francis was a prolific writer whose poems extolled the natural world and the God who created it. Like his contemporaries, Francis looked to nature to find God's presence. Unlike his contemporaries, however, he recognized that animals and plants have their own intrinsic worth and do not need to be useful to humans to be valuable.⁸ Francis believed that creatures gave praise to God simply through the act of being, and therefore Christians should have respect for nature as it is.⁹

This concept of nature changed dramatically in the Renaissance period. The Renaissance saw the rise of science and reason as the world was reduced to its most basic components. The concept of the earth changed from an organic model to a mechanical model in which every natural process could be explained by the interactions of particles. The Creator was transformed into an "inventor with no ongoing relationship with His creation."¹⁰ For people living in the Renaissance, this was a dramatic shift from a world of interconnected subjects to a world of solitude. Thus, it was easy to disengage from nature and view the earth merely as a source of resources for human consumption.¹¹

Not until the 1960s were the effects of industrialization on the natural world questioned. The environmental movement brought attention to the pollution and degradation that had been wrought by human hands and urged a change.¹² Nature began to be seen as a creation entrusted

⁷ Sarkar, 2.

⁸ McFague, 55-7.

⁹ Gottlieb, 7-8.

¹⁰ Sarkar, 3.

¹¹ McFague, 59.

¹² Gottlieb, 8.

to humans, and that we are responsible to the Creator for its well-being. This is a more holistic worldview that accepts the proven science but also recognizes that nature is more than the sum of its parts. Like the ecological processes on which it is based, this model sees all of nature, human and non-human, as interconnected parts of a whole.¹³

The challenge originally came from secular society, such as naturalist Rachel Carson and politician Gaylord Nelson.¹⁴ Religious groups soon joined the movement, mostly from more liberal denominations. One such group was the Faith-Man-Nature group, associated with the National Council of Churches, which sought to create a liaison between scientists and religious thinkers and increase the efficacy of both. The movement within the Church waned in the 1980s along with public sentiment, but has seen rapid increase in the past decades.¹⁵ In 1997 Bartholomew I of the Orthodox Christian Church declared that “to commit a sin against the natural world is a sin,” thus linking environmental degradation with one of the most powerful religious categories.¹⁶

An exceptional example is the World Council of Churches (WCC). The organization includes 340 churches and denominations worldwide and represents over 400 million Christians. It became active in environmental advocacy since the 1970s and lobbies at major international conferences. In 2009 the WCC issued the “Religious Traditions Call to Climate Action,” acknowledging that climate change is a collective threat that will unjustly affect some populations more than others. It calls upon the government leaders to claim responsibility for

¹³ Sarkar, 4.

¹⁴ Gottlieb, 8.

¹⁵ Fowler, 13-4.

¹⁶ Qtd. in Gottlieb, 83.

“building just and sustainable development models in both the North and South.” The WCC had a vocal presence at the United Nations Climate Conference of that year in Copenhagen.¹⁷

Not all Christian denominations have found the ecological argument compelling. In 2000 the Interfaith Council on Environmental Stewardship, a group seeking to serve “humanity and ecology through faith and reason,” released the Cornwall Declaration. It was signed by a group of fifty Jewish, Protestant and Catholic clergy, as well as professors and leaders of lay organizations such as Focus on the Family. The declaration states that “a clean environment is a costly good,” and that the only way to solve environmental problems is through continued economic and technological growth. The threats of global warming, overpopulation and species loss are “unfounded.”¹⁸ In essence, the environmental crisis will be best resolved by continuing along the same path of consumption and growth.

They are, however, a minority, and enough denominations have joined the movement that environmental dialogue and action are now commonplace in churches. What has changed in Christian theological thought to lead so many denominations to radically shift their perspective? We will look at how ideas about spirituality, stewardship, and justice have changed to form a new branch of theology: ecotheology.

The Spiritual/Physical Dichotomy

One of the most persistent theological ideas in Christianity is the separation between the spiritual and physical world. Many scholars see the Fall of Man, when Adam and Eve sinned and were expelled from the Garden of Eden, as a symbol of God’s displeasure with nature. Adam and Eve lived in harmony with the other creatures in the Garden, but when they disobeyed God and

¹⁷ “Justice, diakonia and responsibility for creation.”

¹⁸ “The Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship.”

ate the forbidden fruit the ground was cursed. The relationship between humans and nature changed from one of amity to one of enmity.¹⁹

The New Testament especially emphasizes the importance of spiritual life. The Apostle John says “do not love the world or the things of this world,”²⁰ and the Apostle Paul commands us to “set your minds on things that are above, not on the things on earth.”²¹ From this, Christian traditions have developed theologies that emphasize the distinction between spirituality and physicality, specifically the separation between humans and the rest of nature.²²

The separation was reinforced by the concept of the soul. The soul was seen as nonmaterial and separate from the physical world. God gave humans alone a soul; all other animals lack it and are therefore less valuable. By this process “the *difference* between humans and the rest of nature...became the foundation for a simple and global sense of human *superiority*.” Christianity as a whole became detached from nature and thus could not (or would not) defend it when the Industrial Revolution began environmental degradation on a grand scale.²³

Followers of ecotheology argue that this dichotomy has caused many of the environmental problems we now face. Pope John Paul II, in his message on the World Day of Peace in 1990, stated that “when man turns his back on the Creator’s plan, he provokes a disorder which has inevitable repercussions on the rest of the created order.”²⁴ The Bible contains many statements of the oneness of nature, and to deny human interdependence with the natural world is to deny the wholeness of creation.²⁵

¹⁹ Sarkar, 41-2.

²⁰ I Jn. 2:15.

²¹ Col. 3:2.

²² Sarkar, 146.

²³ Gottlieb, 32-3.

²⁴ Pope John Paul II, I-36.

²⁵ Fowler, 35.

An exemplary instance is the famous poem from Isaiah in which the prophet envisions a world of harmony between humanity and creation:

The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.²⁶

In this ideal world the alienation between humans and nature has been overcome and all creatures live in peace.²⁷ Another enlightening passage comes again from Paul who writes that at the Second Coming of Christ “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.”²⁸ God’s vision for the world is one of wholeness and unity between humans and the creation.

The Incarnation of Jesus is proof that God is tied to the physical world. Jesus existed as a physical human being, not as a spirit or angel. He eats, drinks, and walks with his disciples. His Resurrection from the dead is a foreshadowing of our own resurrection, when God will “dwell among us in a redeemed and restored creation.” God’s salvation is for the whole of creation, not just the humans.²⁹

The shift towards a “greener” theology does not imply nature worship or pantheism. Rather, it is recognition that nature is as important a part of God’s creation as humans are, and that humans should extend their loving faith to all of nature.³⁰

Dominion: Domination or Stewardship?

Author Tim Cooper writes that “Christians in the Green movement often appear to be on the defensive, faced with accusations that Christianity is at least significantly to blame for the

²⁶ Isa. 11:6.

²⁷ Sarkar, 96.

²⁸ Rom. 8:21.

²⁹ Schaefer.

³⁰ McFague, 164.

present crisis, if not its main source.”³¹ One of the greatest challenges facing Christian environmentalists is overcoming the ancient disagreement over what, exactly, is meant by “dominion.”

Immediately after creating Adam God says to him, “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”³² “Be fruitful and multiply” are commands given to all the creatures, but only humans are told to “subdue” and “have dominion.” Clearly, God has given humans a special role in creation.³³

But what does God mean by dominion? Is humanity to be monarch or caregiver? The original Hebrew word, *radah*, means to trample or to prevail against. It is a strong word that would imply that God has granted humans domination over the earth.³⁴

Many critics argue that an attitude of dominion as domination has driven, or at least allowed, much of the environmental degradation in the Western world. They contend that Christianity promotes attitudes of subjugation and hostility towards nature and that the religion has created a “predatory legacy.”³⁵ Lynn White published a scathing critique of Christianity’s role in this in his 1967 article “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.” White claims that although the modern world is ostensibly secular, Christian forms of thinking and acting have become integrated into the culture, even by those who do not consider themselves Christian.³⁶

What does this mean for the environment? In the Judeo-Christian tradition man is made in the image of God and given dominion over the earth. White argues that this theology has

³¹ Qtd. in Fowler, 19.

³² Gen. 1:28.

³³ Sarkar, 140.

³⁴ Sarkar, 140.

³⁵ Fowler, 19 and 62.

³⁶ White, 1205-7.

created “the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen.” Along with the dualism of humanity and nature, Christianity believes that it is God’s will that humans exploit nature for their own ends. Detaching themselves from nature allowed Christians to abuse natural resources with indifference. According to White, the advance of science and technology in the West coincided with the rise of Christianity, whose doctrines permitted the exploitation of nature that would soon be widespread.³⁷

Around the time White published his critique, the concept of stewardship was taking hold in churches nationwide. The Bible features many references to stewards as one who is given responsibility for something that belongs to another. The Greek word for “steward” is *oikonomos*, based on the root word *oikos*, meaning household. Interestingly, *oikos* is also the root for our words “economics” and “ecology.” From this perspective stewardship, economics and ecology are related.³⁸

The term became popular in the 1970s in churches’ campaigns for resources, mostly financial but also of time and talents. Drawing on Biblical notions of stewards and tenants, these campaigns advocated that time and money ultimately belonged to God and that Christians are responsible to God to make good use of them. This coincided with the growth of the environmental movement, and it was soon discovered that the metaphor was an appropriate description of the environment. Thus, stewardship was extended in Christian language to include natural resources.³⁹

Stewardship is the idea that God has designated humans as stewards or caretakers of creation. Soon after Adam’s creation, “the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of

³⁷ White, 1205-7.

³⁸ *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church* 2008.

³⁹ Sarkar, 154.

Eden to till it and keep it.”⁴⁰ The dominion granted him means that he must care for the Garden and keep it healthy. Through a mindset of stewardship all of nature is God’s sacred creation. It is a mindset that “makes nature special and all life sacred and establishes that no one should dare to destroy what God has created.” The true Christian worships God by caring for God’s earth.⁴¹

Stewardship also implies that human beings are as much a part of nature as they are a part of God, although the degree of interconnectedness is contested. Some more ecology-minded proponents argue that humans are one part among infinite equal parts. Others insist that this view contradicts the specialness of human creation and maintain that there must be some difference between humanity and the rest of nature. The disagreements, however, take place within a shared conviction that “people are to act as God’s agents in the community of creation.”⁴²

A criticism of the stewardship model is that it, too, is anthropocentric. Since the concept of stewardship is based in money, nature is seen as yet another resource that must be managed but not necessarily preserved. God created the earth for human use and though we must care for it we may also use its resources as we please.⁴³ Critics argue that Christian stewardship doctrines place too much emphasis on the well-being on humanity and not of nature itself. Defenders, though, say that stewardship acknowledges that humans are God’s servants and God commands the world. Robert Booth Fowler writes that stewardship is neither anthropocentric nor biocentric but theocentric. That is, the central and most significant entity is not humanity or nature but God.⁴⁴

Stewardship offers an alternative to dominion by domination. Sallie McFague writes that when it comes to Genesis, “we simply didn’t get the point.” The message of the creation story is

⁴⁰ Gen. 2:15.

⁴¹ Fowler, 76-7.

⁴² Fowler, 77-8.

⁴³ Sarkar, 162.

⁴⁴ Fowler, 78-80.

that since we are made in God's image we need to reflect God's loving attitude towards nature and all within it.⁴⁵ "Our right to use other life forms is not an unlimited right" but a responsibility given to us by the Creator.⁴⁶ The responsibility of stewardship is a key component of ecotheology, providing us a guideline for sustainable life in God's creation.

Towards Eco-Justice

Christianity is a religion of justice. The ministry of Jesus is rife with admonitions to care for the poor and oppressed. His parables teach of overturning accepted social hierarchies and his acts of healing underscores that physical health and wholeness is a means to salvation. As Jesus famously said, "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."⁴⁷ Extended to the natural world, these teachings mean that true Christians should halt the oppression of nature, overturn the hierarchy of humans over nature, and heal the degraded earth.⁴⁸

Eco-justice is incorporation of the Church's historic sense of justice with the relatively new field of ecology. Although definitions vary, it is almost universally agreed that eco-justice includes environmental sustainability and economic equality. Eco-justice incorporates goals of environmentalism with issues of poverty and inequality, since the two are often related.⁴⁹ The poor are often most vulnerable to natural disasters and health hazards caused by degradation and pollution. Much of the resources consumed in developed nations come from less developed countries—the low costs of products in the supermarkets do not reflect the environmental costs of producing them. John Hill of the UMC General Board of Church and Society states "we cannot separate the plight of the poor from the plight of the planet... Those least responsible for

⁴⁵ McFague, 166.

⁴⁶ Gottlieb, 26.

⁴⁷ Matthew 25:40.

⁴⁸ McFague, 15.

⁴⁹ Fowler, 150.

creating this problem are most vulnerable to its effects.”⁵⁰ Eco-justice seeks to change our institutions to improve the quality of the environment and the quality of life for those living in poverty.⁵¹

Perhaps the most compelling model of eco-justice is that of a world community in which all subjects receive equal care and respect. An ethic of care gives intrinsic value to everything else in the community, but it also means learning and paying attention to what they need to flourish. In a successful community the members take the time to know and care about each other. Caring about the other implies that they have rights and deserve justice. Sallie McFague says the rights/justice model “locks in good feelings towards others, taking it out of the range of changing minds and hearts.”⁵² Many other authors echo the sentiment of community as an ideal Christians should work towards.

Eco-justice insists that the well-being of humankind depends on a thriving earth. A new social paradigm and set of values are needed in order to bring about the change needed for a just and thriving earth.⁵³ Justice is one of Christianity’s strongest contributions to the environmental movement, and the Church has potential to be a powerful voice for eco-justice.

The Environment in Christian Theology

Christian theology historically has had little to say explicitly about the environment. As the environmental movement takes root within the religion, new eco-theologies have evolved to incorporate new ideologies with the old. We will examine first two branches of theology, creation theology and process theology, and then how these manifest in the growing shift towards ecotheology.

⁵⁰ Qtd. in The Council of Bishops, “Foundation Document,” 13.

⁵¹ Aeschliman, I-93-4.

⁵² McFague, 154-7.

⁵³ Sarkar, 197.

Creation Theology: Creation is Continuous

Creation theologians see the unending creation as the central reality in the universe. It describes “a process of ongoing spiritual development and general evolution. There may have been a first creation... but the process of creation has continued steadily.”⁵⁴ God brought the creation into existence from nothing. God did not stop after this first act but is creating at every moment, since it is the power of God that sustains life.⁵⁵ The covenant with Noah after the flood to never again destroy nature proves the Creator’s constant presence. Proponents celebrate holism, regarding Christ as a “cosmic” figure who represents the interrelatedness of everything in the universe.⁵⁶

Creation theology includes a strong element of mysticism. Mysticism is religious practice centered on the firsthand experience of the divine and is found to some degree in all religions. The mystic experience requires shutting down the senses and entering into oneness with the universe. As it relates to creation theology, mysticism is the acceptance of unity between oneself and nature. The most famous (and controversial) proponent of mysticism in creation theology is Dominican priest Matthew Fox. Fox warns that the environmental crisis will not be resolved unless all versions of Christianity are creation-centered.⁵⁷

Creativity and optimism are also important for creation theologians. They tend to focus on the positive processes of creation and not the “gloomy” aspects of Christianity such as sin. The world needs creators, affirmers and doers, not redeemers, savers or confessors. Creation theologians have faith in the human creative capacity to adapt to new situations and resolve

⁵⁴ Fowler, 101.

⁵⁵ Schneider.

⁵⁶ Fowler, 101.

⁵⁷ Boulton, 428-32.

problems. Sin is a negative concept that impedes creativity and promotes pessimism. Focusing on the negative divides God's creation, while following the mystical path leads to unity.⁵⁸

Many of these ideas have received criticism from the rest of the Christian community. The mystic element inspires charges of pantheism: Fox was terminated from the Dominican order for his mystical writing. The goal of full-scale creation theologians to immerse themselves in nature and eliminate distinction between humans and the rest of the nature dissuades more mainstream Christians. They hold that humanity has a special place in creation that should not be erased. Additionally, critics argue that by ignoring sin and changing the role of Christ creation theology fundamentally alters Christianity.⁵⁹

With or without criticism, creation theology adds to the ecotheology discussion. It is more radical and less complicated than other ideologies. Creation theology aims to make drastic changes in society to achieve equality and community and to mesh religion with environmental issues. The mystic element that it shares with secular environmentalists could serve as a bridge to foster cooperation between them.⁶⁰

Process Theology: Creation is Evolving

The basic idea of process theology is that "the universe is always developing and always in process, an always-changing whole in which each part includes all others." Process theology is similar to creation theology, but there are important distinctions. Process theology focuses more on the idea of creation as developing and is more philosophical, while creation theology emphasizes the reality of continuing creation and tends toward the mystical.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Fowler, 101-4.

⁵⁹ Fowler, 102-4.

⁶⁰ Fowler, 105-6.

⁶¹ Fowler, 108.

Process theology emerged in the 1970s under the influence of three major thinkers. Teilhard de Chardin was a French-born Jesuit priest, scientist and philosopher. His view of the universe was that humans are involved in an evolutionary process upward and will eventually arrive at the “Omega point” where everything in the universe converges. In the Christian tradition this is the Second Coming of Christ. God as Creator is the means of this process upwards.⁶²

Alfred North Whitehead did not identify as Christian, but may have had the greatest influence on Christian process theology. Whitehead’s universe is constantly changing. He saw the world as a “multitude of entities, each creating and re-creating itself...in a fluid process where individual elements last only briefly.” Thus, each entity is interconnected and has intrinsic value. God is not a creator but the “lure” that pulls each being to the realization of its full potential.⁶³

Theologian Charles Hartshorne extends Whitehead’s ideas to say that the feeling of sympathy is the instrument by which interconnection is attained. Some creatures have more advanced feelings than others, but “it is basic to all life.” Hartshorne’s God is deeply interdependent with the world and shares. Just like people, God changes, creates and feels sympathy.⁶⁴

From these roots has grown contemporary process theology as it relates to ecotheology. According to process theology, creation was formed out of chaos, not nothing, fundamentally changing God’s role in creation. God is not detached or transcendent from the world but is “totally integrated with life.”⁶⁵ The universe itself is a continuous series of interactions in which

⁶² Fowler, 109.

⁶³ Fowler, 112.

⁶⁴ Fowler, 113.

⁶⁵ Sarkar, 118-9.

every entity is distinct yet interrelated. Process theology often uses the image of a web, something it shares with the ecological movement. Every being has a sense of feeling for itself and for others which forms the connections of the holistic community. This includes God, who affects and is affected by everything. In this theology “people are part of nature and thus part of God or, to put it another way, part of God and thus part of nature.”⁶⁶

Process theology, too, receives much criticism. As in creation theology, process theologians do not discuss evil or sin. In a universe where God is overwhelmingly benign, the concept of evil is “problematic.” Process theology also omits Christ, the Incarnation, the Holy Trinity, and the Creation. Because of this, many critics accuse Christian process theologians of not being truly Christian.⁶⁷ Process theology is not explicitly Christian, so incorporating it into the Christian doctrine will require integrating these fundamental Christian beliefs.

Process theology, like creation theology, holds that humans are intrinsically interconnected with nature and God. Although they may not become wholly integrated into Christian thought, they have the potential to help reshape Christianity to be more holistic, interactive and committed to protecting and preserving nature.⁶⁸

Christian Ecotheology

The contemporary idea of ecotheology is an amalgamation of creation theology and process theology. There are as many definitions of ecotheology as there are followers, drawing components from these and other theologies. They all share two basic principles: nature has value and it is more connected to us than we have historically realized or admitted. Ecotheology is the intersection of ecological and spiritual values.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Fowler, 119.

⁶⁷ Fowler, 118-20.

⁶⁸ Fowler, 122.

⁶⁹ Gottlieb, 22.

We have explored how ideas of spirituality and physicality, stewardship, and justice evolved to become part of the Christian ecotheology doctrine. How can the basic principles of the Christian faith contribute to this model?

Sallie McFague posits two contributions. The first is through justification and sanctification. Justification says that we cannot and do not live perfectly according to God's will, but that God forgives us our failures. We do not have win God's acceptance but are valued as we are. Through sanctification we are directed to do likewise, that is, accept others as they are without condition. In short, "justification acknowledges the depths of human sin, while sanctification insists that once free of it we have a task to do."⁷⁰

The second contribution is the care ethic. As discussed earlier, an ethic of care requires sensitivity to God, other people, and nature, focusing on the well-being of the community instead of individuals. Christianity takes the community care ethic one step further by giving preference to the needy. Historically this has been the needy, sickly and oppressed of the human population, but as the Christian faith extends its reach to nature it will also include the needy, sickly and oppressed parts of the natural world.⁷¹

On an individual level, Christian ecotheology insists upon a change of values and of consciousness. Christianity invites us to be "born again" in Christ and place him at the center of our lives. Ecotheology calls for a similar transformation, the recognition of an "ecological self" at the center of our spiritual lives.⁷² This leads to "a new consciousness to help the environment survive"—an awareness of how individual choices and actions impact the global community.⁷³

⁷⁰ McFague, 168-9.

⁷¹ McFague, 169.

⁷² Gottlieb, 42.

⁷³ Fowler, 145.

Individual action alone will not solve the environmental crisis. Within some strains of ecotheology is the conviction that society itself must make drastic changes. A sustainable, eco-friendly lifestyle is a simple one. It values conservation over consumption. The Apostle Paul writes that “if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.”⁷⁴ Followers of ecotheology believe that leading a simpler, slower and more peaceful life will bring people closer to nature and to God.⁷⁵

Although Jesus Christ never explicitly extended His love to nature, he also never explicitly extended it to slaves, women or people of color. As the notion of the “oppressed” has changed over time Christians have reacted to include them in their doctrines. A universal definition of ecotheology does not exist, but one thing is certain across all denominations: we must care for nature because our commitment to a loving God demands it.⁷⁶

Ecotheology in the Wesleyan Tradition

The United Methodist Church is heavily influenced by the writings of its founder, John Wesley. Environmental elements in Wesley’s theology can help the UMC adapt ecotheology as a crucial element in its doctrine.

In regards to the creation story, Wesley writes that humans were given the responsibility of being “the channel of conveyance” between the Creator and the rest of creation. Thus, humans are stewards and caretakers of the earth. He says that “we are not at liberty to use what God has lodged in our hands as we please, but as God pleases, who alone is the possessor of heaven and

⁷⁴ 1 Tim. 6:8.

⁷⁵ Fowler, 146.

⁷⁶ McFague, 12.

earth and the Lord of every creature.”⁷⁷ Humans do not possess anything; we merely hold in trust that which God has given us.⁷⁸

Animal welfare was a huge concern for John Wesley. He wrote prolifically of the intrinsic value of all creatures and was sensitive to their suffering. Wesley rebukes people who are unnecessarily cruel. He instructs his followers to be merciful and personally see to the care of their animals. In his sermon “On the Education of Children,” Wesley tells his congregation to teach their children from an early age to respect life and to keep them from hurt or kill animals. For “[Christ] is now the life of everything that lives in any kind or degree...He is the fountain of all the life which man possesses in common with other animals.”⁷⁹ We must be conscious of the presence of Christ in all life and give proper respect to nature.⁸⁰

Wesley was fascinated with the natural world, as illustrated in his five-volume series entitled *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation*. For Wesley, every creature and feature of the earth has a purpose. He laments the separation of humans from nature: “by thus acquainting and familiarizing ourselves with the works of nature, we become as it were a member of her family...but while we remain ignorant, we are like strangers and sojourners in a foreign land, unknowing and unknown.”⁸¹ Salvation involves the renewal of humanity’s communion with nature.⁸²

For Wesley, our exploitation of the earth and self-imposed separation is a sin of “practical atheism.” Instead, we are to see “the Creator in the glass of every creature.”⁸³ Wesley held a holistic view of the world, that humans are sustained by the ecological whole because God

⁷⁷ Qtd. in Runyon, 205.

⁷⁸ Runyon, 205-6.

⁷⁹ Qtd. in Runyon, 205.

⁸⁰ Runyon, 203-5.

⁸¹ Qtd. in Runyon, 202.

⁸² Runyon, 201-2.

⁸³ Qtd. in Runyon, 206.

is present in creation. Thus, the Christian faith cannot be divorced from care for the environment.⁸⁴

Wesley's theology, then, does fit with the principles of ecotheology—an important correlation that allows, even encourages, the UMC to engage in the contemporary environmental movement.

The United Methodist Church

The United Methodist Church (UMC) was founded on April 23, 1968, by Bishop Reuben H. Mueller of The Evangelical United Brethren Church and Bishop Lloyd C. Wicke of The Methodist Church.⁸⁵ The combination of traditions has resulted in a denomination that is in part mainstream and in part evangelical. In 2010 the UMC counted 7,853,987 members and was the third-largest denomination in the U.S. and Canada, behind the Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention.⁸⁶

The Church's roots lie in the ministries of brothers John and Charles Wesley, who formed a movement within the Church of England based in scrupulous Bible study with fellow Oxford students in 1729. The Wesley brothers went to Georgia in 1735 to minister to American Indians. They returned to England to find a growing number of preachers following the Wesleyan tradition, nicknamed "Methodists" for their methodical study of the Scripture.⁸⁷ The Church was officially founded in the U.S. as The Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784, with Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke at the head.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Runyon, 206-7.

⁸⁵ "Roots, 1736-1816."

⁸⁶ Jenks.

⁸⁷ Wesley.

⁸⁸ "Roots, 1736-1816."

John Wesley was a strong advocate for social justice, including prison reform, human rights, labor justice, healthcare, slavery, and the humane treatment of animals.⁸⁹ Throughout its history, the UMC has followed Wesley's example and engaged in the current issues of social concern. In 1986 the Council of Bishops released a pastoral letter entitled "In Defense of Creation: The Nuclear Crisis and a Just Peace." It clearly stated the Church's opposition to nuclear war and armament, reminding readers that the world is God's creation, threatened by extinction through a nuclear winter. It was distributed worldwide along with a guide for study and action to bring about peace.⁹⁰

The UMC has also initiated denomination-wide boycotts of companies in order to support social justice. Historic boycotts include the Nestlé Company in 1977 because of its marketing of infant formula to developing countries and Royal Dutch/Shell Oil in 1988 due to its connections to the apartheid system in South Africa. The most recent boycott was in 2004 when the Church joined the Florida-based Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) in protesting Taco Bell for exploiting workers. Taco Bell refused to respond to charges that their tomato supplier workers earned sub-poverty wages.⁹¹ The boycott ended in 2005 when Taco Bell agreed to work with CIW to address working conditions and the wages of farm workers in the tomato industry.⁹²

It is no surprise, then, that the United Methodist Church has involved itself in the environmental movement, incorporating spirituality with social justice and environmental stewardship. We now examine the guiding documents and organizations that support the Church in these issues.

⁸⁹ *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2008.*

⁹⁰ Council of Bishops, "God's Renewed Creation," 1.

⁹¹ Bloom, "United Methodists join boycott of Taco Bell."

⁹² Bloom, "Worker coalition ends boycott of Taco Bell."

The Book of Resolutions

Among the most important documents of the Church are *The Book of Discipline* and *The Book of Resolutions*. *The Book of Discipline* sets forth the laws, plan, polity, and process by which United Methodists govern themselves. *The Book of Discipline* is revised, updated, and republished after approval by the each successive General Conference, the most recent of which was held in 2008.⁹³ Non-legislative changes are published in *The Book of Resolutions*. Resolutions are non-binding but strongly encouraged as guidelines for United Methodist members.⁹⁴

The General Conference added a resolution regarding environmental stewardship in 1984, which was revised and readopted in 2000. The resolution states that “our covenant with God requires us to be stewards, protectors, and defenders of all creation.”⁹⁵ The Biblical basis is Psalm 24:1: “The earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it.”⁹⁶ Environmental stewardship necessitates the universal rights to clean air, clean water, and a community free of toxics, as well as the responsible use of natural resources, land and technology. The resolution concludes by urging all United Methodists to become stewards of God’s earth and for all church agencies to implement the resolution.⁹⁷

Also included in *The Book of Resolutions* are the Social Principles, which address current social policies of the UMC. They cover over 200 subjects and are divided into The Natural World, The Nurturing World, The Social Community, The Economic Community, The Political Community, and The World Community. These Principles are not church laws but “a prayerful and thoughtful effort on the part of the General Conference to speak to the human issues in the

⁹³ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2008.*

⁹⁴ *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2008.*

⁹⁵ *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2008.*

⁹⁶ Psalm 24:1.

⁹⁷ *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2008.*

contemporary world from a sound biblical and theological foundation as historically demonstrated in United Methodist traditions.” They are meant to be persuasive and enact voluntary change in church members.⁹⁸

Appropriately, as the Social Principles have been expanded and updated throughout the years, they have come to include more environmental issues. We will now examine more closely the relevant resolutions and what implications they have for the Church and its members.

The Natural World

This principle regards the creation and the role of humans in its stewardship. It states that the natural world and its resources “are to be valued and conserved because they are God’s creation and not solely because they are useful to human beings.” The misuse and consumption of natural resources, predominantly by industrialized societies, “jeopardizes the natural heritage that God has entrusted to all generations.” This principle calls for church members to recognize their own responsibility and work to “to support a more ecologically equitable and sustainable world.”⁹⁹

Specific recommendations for achieving these goals range from the individual to the institutional and include:

- reducing waste and improving recycling and disposal
- reducing or eliminating use of chemical pesticides
- preserving old-growth forests
- halting the privatization of water resources
- energy conservation and the development of renewable energy sources.

⁹⁸ *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2008.*

⁹⁹ *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2008.*

- the humane treatment of domestic animals, research animals and those raised for consumption
- the preservation of species threatened with extinction
- the removal of pesticides, antibiotics and other contaminants from food and water supplies
- a transition to sustainable and organic agriculture

The UMC recognizes anthropogenic climate change and that its impacts will “disproportionately affect individuals and nations least responsible for [greenhouse gas] emissions”. It supports mandatory reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and calls on “individuals, congregations, businesses, industries, and communities to reduce their emissions.”¹⁰⁰

This statement is hugely significant. One of the greatest challenges to reducing climate change and global warming is simply recognizing that humans are the source of the problem and must take action to resolve it.¹⁰¹ By acknowledging the anthropogenic cause of climate change in its official documents, the United Methodist Church assumes responsibility for its past actions and for working to improve the future. Mandatory greenhouse gas reductions have been politically controversial, and for the Church to take a firm stand on this issue at the risk of alienating some of its members is a bold step. In addition, many of these resolutions emphasize the importance of structural changes as well as individual action—it will take both to have any significant impact on environmental problems.

¹⁰⁰ *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2008.*

¹⁰¹ Global Warming Hoax

The Social and Economic Communities

These principles are not directly related to the environment but do address some environmental issues. The principle of The Social Community deals with issues of equality and human rights. In regards to population, it states that “the reduction of the rate of consumption of resources by the affluent and the reduction of current world population growth rates have become imperative.” The Church advocates optional population control along with the improvement in women’s status and a more equitable use of resources, while opposing forced abortion or sterilization. The principle also addresses sustainable agriculture, stating that the world needs “an agricultural system that uses sustainable methods, respects ecosystems, and promotes a livelihood for people that work the land.” This includes humane treatment of animals, preservation of biodiversity, and fair trade of agricultural products.¹⁰²

The principle of The Economic Community asserts that public and private businesses are responsible for their social costs and should be held accountable. Consumers, declares the Church, should limit their consumption to what is necessary and then use their economic power to “encourage the manufacture of goods that are necessary and beneficial to humanity while avoiding the desecration of the environment in either production or consumption.” Consumers are encouraged to seek Fair Trade Certified products to ensure that the workers receive fair treatment and wages. The Church supports the use of boycotts, advertising and letter writing in advocating for change in business practices.¹⁰³

The General Board of Church and Society

Overseeing the implementation of these Social Principles is the General Board of Church and Society (GBCS), one of four international general program boards of the UMC. It is made up

¹⁰² *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2008.*

¹⁰³ *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2008.*

of 65 ministers, with James E. Winkler as the current General Secretary. The board's responsibilities include creating and promoting programs to implement the Social Principles, conducting research on issues that confront the Church, and developing strategies for systemic social change. GBCS is a very public program of the Church and is involved in projects nationwide and internationally.¹⁰⁴ They actively lobby for bills in Congress regarding social justice. For example, GBCS lobbied strongly for health care reform, which was eventually passed in March 2010.¹⁰⁵

Within GBCS is the Economic and Environmental Justice Program. The goals of the program are to “restore and protect God’s creation, ensure just and sustainable communities, and seek economic opportunity and security for all” through education and advocacy. The program works on regional, national and international levels. On the issue of clean water, for example, GBCS has hosted regional gatherings focused on specific watersheds and has lobbied Congress to ban mountaintop removal coal mining, which causes heavy water pollution. It has worked with the United Nations to further its Millennium Development Goal of reducing by half the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water.¹⁰⁶

Hope and Action

In addition to the resolutions included in the UMC’s organizational structure, many of its leaders are advocating for environmental stewardship. In 2009, The Council of Bishops wrote a pastoral letter intended to engage church members to “a deeper spiritual consciousness as stewards and caretakers of creation.” Entitled “God’s Renewed Creation: Call to Hope and

¹⁰⁴ “The General Board of Church and Society.”

¹⁰⁵ Rhodes.

¹⁰⁶ “Clean Water.”

Action,” the letter presents the challenges presented by the environmental crisis and offers guidelines for addressing them.¹⁰⁷

“God’s Renewed Creation” identifies three significant, interrelated threats: pandemic poverty and disease, environmental degradation, and the proliferation of weapons and violence. Following the holistic model, it is not a list of isolated problems affecting separate communities but is part of an interconnected world system. These threats arose from human neglect and selfishness, and will only be renewed if everyone participates. The central theme is that “we cannot help the world until we change our way of being in it.”¹⁰⁸

John Wesley taught that “the gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social. No holiness but social holiness.”¹⁰⁹ The Bishops extend this to environmental holiness, the idea that Christ’s teachings apply to all of creation. Methodists practice social and environmental holiness by caring for people and the planet.¹¹⁰

The Bishops make nine pledges rededicating themselves to leadership within the Church and in outreach to be stewards of the earth. These include religious actions such as following God’s vision of renewal and prayerful self-examination, along with the more secular goals of advocating for peace and justice in governmental organizations, reducing their carbon footprint, and providing resources for their conferences to do the same.¹¹¹

The Council created a website, www.hopeandaction.org, with easy access to these resources. Congregations can download educational materials and guidelines for “greening” their church, available in several languages. They can also upload their own stories, photos and videos

¹⁰⁷ Council of Bishops, “Foundation Document,” 2.

¹⁰⁸ Council of Bishops, “God’s Renewed Creation,” 1.

¹⁰⁹ Qtd. in Council of Bishops, “God’s Renewed Creation,” 2.

¹¹⁰ Council of Bishops, “God’s Renewed Creation,” 2.

¹¹¹ Council of Bishops, “God’s Renewed Creation,” 3-4.

to share their success stories with other churches around the world.¹¹² The Council also co-sponsored the Caring for Creation Conference in Lake Junaluska, NC, in April 2010. The Conference offered workshops and discussions for church leaders to develop environmental stewardship within their congregations.¹¹³

Theologies and resolutions do not translate into change. In order to tackle the environmental challenge the United Methodist Church needs to be active in its “green” initiatives, much as it is in Washington, DC.

Beth Norcross and the Green Seminary Initiative

Beth Norcross is a creation theologian, environmental advocate and adjunct professor at Wesley Theological Seminary, a United Methodist seminary. She co-founded the Green Seminary Initiative, a program designed to help seminaries incorporate care for creation and other ecotheology themes into its curriculum and foster environmental leadership in their graduates. Norcross teaches ecotheology courses at Wesley and has written a number of study guides, including the Christian companion to the PBS documentary series *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*.¹¹⁴

In her work with churches and seminaries across all denominations, Norcross has observed several obstacles that prevent churches from adopting a more eco-friendly ministry. The most important factor is the involvement of an individual or group who is passionate about the environment and will excite the interest of the rest of the community. Without this presence, environmental issues tend to remain low on the list of priorities.¹¹⁵

¹¹² God's Renewed Creation: Call to Hope and Action.

¹¹³ “Caring for Creation.”

¹¹⁴ Norcross.

¹¹⁵ Norcross.

For churches involved in social justice the environment is sometimes seen as competition, although as we have seen ideas of justice are changing to include the environment. The clergy themselves are usually busy and lack time to add a completely new issue to their ministry. Financial resources are often tight and reserved for other uses. Part of Norcross' work is to implement energy and waste reducing measures that will save the church money in the long term, but usually these require a large initial investment. Some churches, typically (although not necessarily) more conservative ones, see ecotheology as liberal and "New Age-y" and resist for political reasons.¹¹⁶

One of the biggest problems Norcross sees is that the current leaders of the Church were not taught to appreciate and care for the environment as children. The working theology they were taught was humanistic and did not include the creation. Norcross believes that for the environmental movement to successfully meld with Christianity the values of ecology need to be incorporated into the theology.¹¹⁷

The theology that Norcross advocates is one that "takes seriously our responsibility to the value God places on creation." Christians are tasked to keep God's vision of creation by tilling and keeping the garden and extending "love your neighbor" to non-humans. Norcross says it is crucial to include the creation in children's education because our early years shape our values and ethics. The natural world is a way that we access God and by separating ourselves from nature we have "cut off an avenue to God."¹¹⁸

Norcross works with seminaries specifically because she finds that they tend to be behind churches in adapting new trends. She sees great potential for change in churches through education of its leaders. The Green Seminary Initiative works on "greening" buildings, grounds,

¹¹⁶ Norcross.

¹¹⁷ Norcross.

¹¹⁸ Norcross.

and food services, infusing creation into the curriculum, and engaging with creation in worship. Successes at Wesley include Norcross' courses, events such as film screenings, and the dining hall's use of primarily local food, elimination of trays, and "meatless Mondays." Norcross currently works with 30 seminaries around the country and is optimistic that her program will expand and promote real change in churches.¹¹⁹

Ecotheology in Action at Metropolitan UMC

In honor of Earth Day's 40th anniversary in 2010, Rev. Dr. Charles Parker at Metropolitan United Methodist Church gave a sermon series on the Church and the environment. In a sermon titled "Reverence," Parker told his congregation that "how we care for the earth is an expression of our reverence for God." The sermon shapes the values and principles of ecotheology into practical applications for the congregation.¹²⁰

The created world, says Parker, is a charge for humans to keep as stewards. God the Creator is revealed to us through creation so we must care for it and pay it attention. John Wesley said that "faith in Jesus Christ can and will lead us beyond an exclusive concern for the well-being of other human beings to a broader concern for the well-being of the birds in our backyards, the fish in our rivers, and every living creature on the face of the earth." Parker says these words are no longer optional—that we as Christians are called to act immediately to save God's creation.¹²¹

Parker criticizes the "culture of rampant consumerism" of the U.S., stating that our consumption comes at the expense of the developing world and that we do not change simply because it is inconvenient. He gives three suggestions for initiating a lifestyle change. First, we need to pay attention to the physical world around us and overcome our society's separation

¹¹⁹ Norcross.

¹²⁰ Parker.

¹²¹ Parker.

between humans and nature. Then, we should cultivate a sense of awe and humbleness in the presence of God's creation, whether it is a big moment of wonder or a small moment of interconnectedness. From these will arise a culture of care and stewardship. We are charged to care for the earth and to offer it back to God "in better shape than we found it."¹²²

He charged the congregation to start with a small change—switching out the five most used light bulbs for compact fluorescent bulbs. Parker cited the Environmental Protection Agency that if every household in the U.S. did this it would save the emissions equivalent of 21 coal-fired power plants and eight million cars. Parker said we are at a critical moment in history and that change will be made by a lot of small things happening.¹²³ After the sermon, the congregation prayed Francis of Assisi's Cantic of the Sun.

Parker's sermon neatly sums up the basic principles of ecotheology. In presenting this series he ensures that environmental issues will enter the dialogue of the Metropolitan community. It will be through sermons such as these in churches of all denominations throughout the country that change will happen. Infusing ecotheology into church ministry raises consciousness of environmental issues and responsibilities. While the environmental crisis requires institutional change to be fully resolved, institutional change will never come about without pressure from individuals. Through the efforts of individual churches and congregations, Christians can fulfill God's call to be stewards of the earth.

Conclusion

Upon the creation of the world, "God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good."¹²⁴ Not good for humans, but good in itself. A Christian ecotheology values the natural world and mandates that humans be its stewards. Infusing a sense of care and justice into

¹²² Parker.

¹²³ Parker.

¹²⁴ Gen. 1:31a.

theology will promote ecological values. Translating these values into action can bring about societal change to create the ideal global community—one in which everyone has access to a safe, clean and healthy environment.

Pervading the United Methodist Church writings regarding the environment is a feeling of hope. After all, the primary document on the subject is titled “A Call to Hope and Action.” Methodists, and Christians in general, are optimistic that they can enact real change in their congregations and society. “With God all things are possible,”¹²⁵ even overcoming centuries of environmental abuse to heal and preserve the natural world as God intended.

¹²⁵ Mt. 19:26.

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