

## B1. Christianity and ecological sustainability

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Christian concern for environmental issues emerged in the 1950s and is often described as 'stewardship' or 'creation-care'. Stimulated by the Brundtland Report and thinking pioneered outside the church, UK denominations have produced environmental statements, but among local Christian leaders and congregations the integration of earth-care into mission, theology, biblical exegesis, liturgy and worship is patchy at best. The need for a reformed Christian teaching at all levels is clear. The module aims to suggest that stewardship is not a hobby for a few enthusiasts but integral to the mission of the church, arising from core doctrines and the Bible.

This case study describes an activity in which theology students engage in online discussion of journal articles and other sources. The context is a Level 1 module in the Open Theological College (OTC) programme. This offers a BA (Hons) award and also staged awards at DipHE and CertHE, through distance-learning. Students are typically mature, ages ranging from 20 to 80, and some are international. Most are active members of Christian churches, and some work in faith-based organizations and lay or ordained Christian ministry. Although a core OTC module includes one unit on environmental issues, this optional module *Christian Faith and the Environment* allows interested students to explore in more depth.

### **Aims**

The seminar activity which is described here is designed to offer students opportunities to reflect on Christian theology in the light of environmental issues, consider practical actions that embody an ecotheology, and explore and share ecological readings of the Bible with other members of their Christian community. It is both scholarly and practical, facilitating the development of understandings, skills and personal attributes appropriate for contemporary citizenship.

## Rationale

The module includes units on Global Environment, Limits to Growth, Sustainability, Anthropocentrism, Creation, Eden and the Promised Land, Fellow Creatures, Dominion, Sin, Curse and Fall, Ethics, Future Hope, Worship, Lifestyle and Mission. One aim of the seminar is to stimulate discussion of the topics explored in the module.

Although distance-learning students can communicate with tutors by email and telephone, the only peer-group exchanges are through a virtual learning environment, WebCT. This is used throughout the semester and stimulus questions are provided for each unit, but more concentrated interaction occurs during the time-limited seminar which runs for ten days.

## Implementation

The seminar consists of five activities. Each uses an article available online through ATHENS or otherwise, and asks between two and eight stimulus questions. The tutor visits the forum daily to facilitate the development of the student community, adding responses or prompting further discussion. A typical set of articles and activities includes the following:

1. Spanner (1998) - This raises questions about different models used to describe the relation of humankind to the rest of life on earth: stewardship, kingship, and friendship.
2. Bauckham (2002) - This raises questions about the ways in which nonhuman creatures (including inanimate ones) praise their creator.
3. Zerbe (1992) - At the level of 'prooftexting' eco-friendly statements are easier to find in the Old Testament than the New Testament, but this approach is weak not least because Christians pay more attention to the latter. In this activity students engage with thematic approaches that enable ecotheology and ecobiblical exegesis of the New Testament.
4. Mills (2000) - In this activity students explore sustainability in economic terms. This raises questions about whether and how biblical texts from ancient worlds can be used to develop policy on complex contemporary issues.
5. Pickering (2004) - This article about the Ecocongregations project aims to encourage students to discuss and reflect on practical ways that local churches might practice sustainability.

The module is open to students of all faiths or none. An alternative article, Northcott (2005), is offered in case lack of congregational experience makes the activity difficult.

On activity 4 one student commented:

*I think this is a very brave article. He [Mills] gives specific answers to economic issues which makes him wide open to criticism. I was intrigued by some of his ideas like a national investment fund and interest free charity lending. I think his challenge that the biblical principles that worked in Old Testament times could work today is commendable.*

In optional activity 5a, to the question 'In debates about wilderness, what might Christian insights offer?' one student responded:

- *Recognition of the value of wilderness to human well-being, healing, prayer and listening to God.*
- *That nature can be in sympathetic relationship with human development if ecosystems are understood.*
- *Highlights the human injustice in causing local people to be alienated and removed from areas of 'pristinisation'.*

### **Sustainability focus**

During the activity students reflect on sustainability not only as a matter of self-interest for human communities, but also as a question about the intrinsic value of the earth and non-human species. Scientific, economic and social perspectives are addressed but motivation to sustainable living is developed primarily from the resources of Christian traditions.

For example, the fifth activity introduces examples of sustainability projects developed by local Christian communities, and asks students to reflect on sustainability initiatives in their own community, or others they know about. Here are two extracts from student contributions:

*The EcoCongregations [project] ... seems to be a combination of activities including teaching in Sunday meetings and bible studies; teaching and projects for children; an ongoing focus on eco issues and practical measures such as recycling, creating wilderness areas in church grounds and even protesting. I found this very helpful. Our church has no building of its own but is in the process of*

*purchasing a flat which we will use in the community for all sorts of things. I'm responsible with another lady for the setup and management. I want it to be as green as possible and this has given me encouragement and ideas. I will use some of the ecocongregation material to help me explain to our finance people why I'm buying eco-cleaning products, low energy bulbs, recycling bins etc.*

*I was quite inspired by Norman Crowson's story of what they did at Dronfield (south of Sheffield). The local churches gathered the support of local naturalist and environmental groups – like the local RSPB group, of which Norman is a leading member. With the permission and support of the local authority, and the help of some Bible college students, they transformed an area in the centre of the community, which had become an eyesore and a dumping ground, into an attractive area of lake, paths and woodland, which is good both for the community and for wildlife. When I saw it there were ducks on the lake and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers (not very common) in the woodland.*

### **Active learning**

The John Ray Initiative (JRI) participated in the development of this module, identifying and developing appropriate learning materials and advising on activities alongside university staff. Such partnerships are themselves a signifier of sustainable practice, co-learning taking place among staff.

JRI is an educational charity, founded by Sir John Houghton and others, and based at the University of Gloucestershire since 1999. Two of its conferences were run jointly with the University, 'Jesus and the Earth' in 2003, and 'End of Life?' on waste management in 2006, combined with 'Beauty for Ashes', a Chaplaincy art exhibition in which students from the University's Fine Art course contributed works made from waste materials. JRI in collaboration with other agencies is internationally active, notably in promoting climate change awareness among US Evangelicals (Climate Forum 2002). Further information on JRI publications and events is available online (JRI 2007).

Students are also eligible to become JRI Associates, a programme designed to encourage and equip local speakers and activists. Related projects are also publicised, such as those organized by Christians in Conservation.

### **Feedback**

These are reflective comments posted by students on the forum:

*The course has made me think a lot about the place of humans in the world and also the place of the environment and animals. I don't think I have a lot of answers yet but my worldview is changing and I'm starting to question long held beliefs. I'm also coming to the conclusion that Christians are guilty of taking our privileged position as ... God's children for granted. And worse, of abusing this position, by using it for selfish ends.*

*I do think that has implications for Christian mission. It engages with the environmental problems of our world.*

### **Strengths and weaknesses**

The activities go beyond the textbooks by requiring students to read journal articles, including from the specialist journal *Ecotheology* (which in 2007 became *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*). Students discuss a variety of themes and are able to share thoughts with their peers and the module tutor. Some confusion in vocabulary emerged during discussions and was resolved productively.

The seminar is optional and does not directly contribute to assessment. With only a small group of students participating the discussion was limited but even so there were 41 messages of which many were substantial in length and showed deep reflection and original thinking. In future presentations it is intended to link the seminar to formal assessment.

### **Programmes**

Christian Faith and the Environment is a 12 CATS module at Level 1 on the CertHE, DipHE and BA (Hons) Theology programmes.

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**Key words:**

Stewardship; creation; intrinsic value; covenant; ethics; church

**References**

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