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What is the Point of the Fifth Mark of Mission of the Anglican Church?

by

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"In the Biblical view, nature is creation, a sublime gift made to us, but that ultimately still belongs to God" (Gottlieb 2006)

Introduction

In 1990, a quarter of a century ago, the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC) added a fifth theme to the accepted four-fold mission: **"**To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth". The 5th Mark of Mission represented the coming together of the theological debates about humankind's role on Earth with the ecological concerns recognized by some scientists 50 years earlier. World Conservation Groups and other secular international bodies took up the matter culminating in the Brundland Report of 1987 and the Earth Summit of 1992. Religious bodies such as the World Council of Churches as well as some national faith-based groups also became involved in raising awareness about their responsibility towards the environment. This global concern about the environment emerged in light of the evidence of the appalling track record of degradation, and the changes occurring on planet earth, brought about by human action and amounting to what became regarded as an 'environmental crisis'.

Despite the Christian sensitivity to Creation and the commonly-held representation of humankind as steward of creation, the Church had failed to bring about an ethic that strives to preserve the integrity of creation in a changing world. Furthermore, the Christian religion had been **blamed** for being largely responsible for the environmental crisis (White, 1967). It has been noted elsewhere that, "the environmental crisis is a crisis of humankind, not of nature" (Thomas-Hope 1996). Furthermore, from the perspective of social behaviour it is known that, "all the factors which alter our natural environment have their roots in economic and social processes within human society, and they are themselves rooted in man's self-expression" (Moltmann 1976: 133). Therefore, the task of Christian theology should surely be to re-evaluate contemporary values in relation to our current material culture, as well as those aspects of human actions which affect the integrity of Creation and life on Earth. Undoubtedly, the world has changed forever, and the new environmental theology is an attempt to come to grips with that change from the standpoint of faith, and our relationship with God.

The fifth Mark of Mission thus urges the re-assessment of theology in light of the environmental crisis, and addresses the problematic referred to as Orthodox Christian anthropocentric arrogance toward the natural world.[1]

The Church and the 'Environmental Crisis'

Environmental Ethics

Religious beliefs, as articulated intellectually in theological models, have been shown to have a significant impact on ethics. This follows from the influence that theological statements, doctrines, and beliefs have in affecting the meaning and value which human consciousness places on a thing or being. This bestowal of meaning and value precedes any deliberate reasoning on how one should behave towards it. So all belief models and, in the present context, theological models, such as those pertaining to God as Creator, are effective at the most basic level of perception, that is at the level of what the world of nature, or the environment, is seen **as** (Peacock 1979)**.**

Since religious beliefs are so influential in the formulation of ethics and practical actions towards people, then what is the Church's guidance when it comes to ethics of actions towards the Earth? There is ample scientific evidence of what the consequences of ill-use of the environment are, but is there any

complementary belief articulated from the Christian perspective on the consequences of mis-use of the Earth? Is there a Christian environmental ethic at all? More than eighty years ago (and with no real change since then), Albert Schweitzer stated that the great fault of all ethics is that people, ". . . believed themselves to have to deal only with the relation of man to man. In reality, however, the question is, what is his attitude to the world and all life that comes within his reach" (Schweitzer, 1933:18, cited in Peacock 1979: 298). The answer is that there is as yet no land ethic although this was noted by Aldo Leopold (1949) more than seven decades ago, nor is there any environmental ethic from a Christian perspective which addresses how we should treat with planet Earth. The constitutions of Caribbean nations following in the early tradition[2], give ownership precedence over any other considerations in determining rights over what is done to or on the land (Thomas-Hope 2013). Until recently worldwide and even now in the Caribbean, the Church has been minimal in its witness and teaching, and silent in the public arena, on matters relating to the environment. The reality is that the lack of Church doctrine that would guide ethics could be attributed to the existence of a theological blind-spot with regard to environment.

Theological Blind-Spot

The Judeo-Christian religion has been held culpable with regard to the current environmental crisis by many, and most vociferously by Lynn White (1967). This culpability has been seen as the consequence of the Judeo-Christian tradition, based on Genesis 1: 28, declaring that humans were made to have 'dominion' over the Earth and to 'subdue' it. Interpretations of these words suggested that the world of nature exists principally to serve humankind, and this has been seen as license for the limitless exploitation of the earth and its resources.

In defense, it has been pointed out that over-exploitative practices were not confined to the Judeo-Christian societies and existed long before the Jewish prophets. Secondly, even among followers of the Judeo-Christian tradition, there have been marked historical divergences in attitudes towards the Earth. For example, St Francis and St Benedict fostered an ordered balanced interplay with natural cycles which increased productivity in areas where Benedictines and Cistercians settled (Fergusson 2007). However, these were among the exceptions, and protecting the environment against exploitative action solely, or primarily for material gain, is the dominant culture of our time. All elements of the natural environment are seen as synonymous with 'resources' which have to be converted into monetary terms, or development potential, in order to have value. To ascribe value or worth to the natural environment for any other reason than for human use and pleasure is blatantly counter-cultural. But so too is much of the Christian faith and message. The Church could not continue to look on with a 'blind spot', and to be simply apologetic for its complicity in the destruction of the Earth through implicitly condoning egocentrism and anthropocentrism when it comes to our relationship with the Earth

The persistent environmental blind-spot was largely the result of beliefs related to a religious tradition embedded in a paradigm or theology of Dualism and Dominion.

Dualism

A conceptual separation of God from the Earth followed from the doctrine of creation rooted in early exegesis which shaped the understanding of the God-world relationship as that of a transcendent God (in heaven) who, having created the world, then continued to rule over it as king and judge. It is true that this model enabled the depicting of God's transcendence and otherness from creaturely reality while, at the

same time, stressing the significance of a relationship that could be described in the language of covenant and fellowship. But in this approach, it would seem that God's immanence is only really understood in terms of the coming of the Holy Spirit to humankind at the historical occasion of Pentecost. Part of the problem was that the Genesis account of creation was taken to be primarily an explanatory hypothesis, (albeit reflected through a mythical story), about how the world got started, rather than being seen more as a proclamation of God's Covenant with the Earth. The classical doctrine of Creation thus missed the point that Creation and covenant are closely connected.[3] Also significant, is the idea of the 'cosmic Christ' in the New Testament.[4] The Spirit continues to indwell creation; and such indwelling presence of God in creation is not simply the sustaining of a creation that was brought into being at the beginning but is also involved in the work of redemption that is cosmic in scope (Fergusson 2007; Moltmann 1985; 1992). God's redemptiveness is seen as relevant to all of creation in a number of biblical references.[5] Peacock also notes God's Being as transcendence-in-immanence in creation with its fulfillment in salvation and redemption through Jesus. This is affirmed in the words of the Nicene Creed: ". . . One Lord Jesus Christ by whom all things were made".

Not only has a transcendent God been conceptualized as separate from the world, but so too have humans been seen as separate from Earth - their environment. This is despite humankind's material connection with Earth by coming from and returning to dust. The Hebrew name Adam is derived from the noun *'adama* meaning earth. Adam derives life from the earth/dust to which he subsequently returns. Likewise, Adam's companion (made from Adam and therefore also of the Earth), is *Hava* – Eve in English, which means life and mother of all living (Genesis 3: 20). Together, they signify 'earth/or soil' and 'life' (Rasmussen 2006). Lerner (1995: 416) comments that this underscores, ". . . a real humility in which we [should] see ourselves as part of the totality of Being, understanding that nature itself is permeated with the spirit of God". Lerner's point is that this 'chosenness' of the human species and connectedness with Earth should bring about the sense of obligation to care for the Earth.

The perceived separation of people from nature, with nature subordinate and made primarily for human benefit, was justified by the reference to humans having been created on the final day, regarded as the high-point of a 6-day creation (Genesis 1). To the contrary, recent exegesis points out that the climax of the story is not the creation of human beings on the 6th day, but the day following – the day of rest when God declared creation to be good. This recent theology has sought to shift the emphasis from the anthropocentrism of earlier theologies. Nevertheless, the believed human superiority over nature was further supported by the scriptural reference to humans having been created in the image of God - thus placing them above all else in the created order. Furthermore, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, humans not only viewed themselves as separate from, and superior to, nature but also as having being granted 'dominion over' it.

Dominion

Dominion in the early Christian centuries was predominantly concerned with mutual sharing of creation and not a legitimization of wanton exploitation. This changed in medieval times and was linked to the de-sacralization of nature prompted by early stages of modern science promoted by Francis Bacon and leading to the 'Enlightenment' of the 18th century. (This is **not** to suggest that nature should be re-sacralized since, having been created 'out of nothing' is not itself divine). However, as Sittler stresses,

humans ought to stand alongside nature as a cherishing brother, for nature too "is God's creation and bears' God's image" (Sittler, 2006: 53).

In any case, most thinking members of the Church would agree that dominion does not mean domination or despotism. For one thing, The Bible does not represent dominion over nature as brutally exploitative as if nature was there only for human benefit and giving license to environmental destruction; quite the reverse. Secondly there are numerous scriptural references to the human limitations in exercising dominion over nature.[6]

Notwithstanding these caveats, the evidence is that:

> . . . the [earlier] doctrine of creation has not instilled attitudes of harmony towards nature to the extent that it should have. Perhaps there is some stress or emphasis or omission that has rendered them easily ignored or distorted. Or perhaps the Judeo-Christian outlook on created nature lacks a particular emphasis which is especially important when science shapes man's ideas, and technology gives tremendous powers over non-human nature" (Peacock *op cit*: 291).

There was pressing need to re-evaluate contemporary Christian understandings and values with regard to Creation. It is, therefore, of great importance that the doctrine of creation has undergone a resurgence of interest in recent years. Relatively neglected during the mid-20th Century theological debates, it has attracted attention and renewed interest more recently.

Creation Theology Re-visited

There seems little doubt that theological models of God as Creator, of all-that-is as created from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), as well as theological understandings of humankind in relation to God and nature, cannot fail to shape how we see the natural world, and thus to influence our attitudes and actions towards it (Peacock 1979).

The Natural Environment as Creation

To see the natural world *as* creation is to see it from a perspective which could well prove crucial to the Church's mission and ministry in the future. First, it is important to recognize that this is not simply a scientific statement. As Sittler pointed out:

> It is a fallacy to suppose that because we know about and think about atoms, genes, astro-physical space and organization we are thereby thinking about creation . . . **Creation is a religious and philosophical term;** it is not a term whose proper reference is simply that fact of, or the possible structure and processes of, the world. The term 'creation' contains and requires a God-postulation (Sittler 1972: 99).

Until we ". . . admit nature **as** the creation into our reflexive nexus, and permit nature there to retain its intransigent reality, we shall neither theologize soberly nor be theologically guided to act constructively" (Ibid). From this conceptualization, nature, Earth and Cosmos and therefore, environment, take on a completely different value and meaning than before. It now demands a relationship of a different order: namely to view our actions in relation to the Earth from a spiritual perspective; and to urge a re-evaluation of our understanding of humankind and our place within Creation, God's covenant of salvation and redemption. Just as the transcendence and imminence of God can be appreciated through the

acknowledgement of God as Trinity, both creation and redemption of the cosmos are joined through an understanding of the Spirit in a Trinitarian way.

Humans in the Image and Likeness of God

The interpretation of humankind created in God's image that was current at the time of White's criticism of the Judeo-Christian religion, was referring to the possession of an immortal soul and reason. So, at that time, human dominion tended to be thought of not as control and exploitation, but as **superiority** of rational beings, over the soulless and mortal. What then is the meaning of 'the image of God' (*imago Dei)* in recent exegesis? In the Hebraic context, the divine image refers not to the possession of an immortal soul (as in the Greek tradition) but more to the role exercised by human beings in the cosmic order" (Fergusson 2007*:* 75). As those who can hear and obey the divine word, human beings are charged with acting on God's behalf in relation to one another and to the rest of creation. This favours relational accounts of the *imago Dei*.

The relational emphasis is consistent with other theological interpretations of *imago Dei* as humans able to represent God. Based on study of the meaning ascribed to this term in all the culturally dependent contexts, there was impressive evidence that what was said of the king as the image of God in Egypt and Mesopotamia was the basis of the Genesis text. Westermann (1974: 58) concluded (in accordance with W.H.Schmidt and H.Wilderberger) that, ". . . the image of God is to be understood in the sense of viceroy or representative: There is but one legitimate image through which God shows himself in the world and that is man".

There is no evidence that the image of God has anything to do with dominion over nature. Dominion would then be consequential upon the way in which God relates to creation. Westermann (*op. cit*.) and Barr (1972) agree that being in the image of God is simply being 'human' without any specific qualification or qualities – in other words, humankind **is** in the image of God. (1974).This can be seen in light of the Hebrew understanding of the human being as a psychosomatic unity – spirit and body. In other words, it is the total person who is made in the image of God (Peacock 1979).

Creation and the Doctrine of Incarnation

It now seems likely that Christians, on the same grounds as Jews, came to value the universe and, therefore, creation, as being **itself** the 'primary mode of God's presence' and declared by God to be good (resisting Gnosticism and other cults that regard matter, and so the world, to be inherently evil). The Christians had an even stronger reason for their affirmation of both the reality and worth of the created order – namely, the doctrine of incarnation (Peacock).

The doctrine of incarnation has profound implications for our understanding of nature or environment whether conceptualized in its classical mystical form (**I**ncarnation) or in the continuous, immanentist form (**i**ncarnation). For, as Peacock points out, ". . . if God was able to express the nature of his own being, not only implicitly by sustaining the world in being, but explicitly in and through the life, death and resurrection of the man Jesus, then the world of matter organized in the form we call a man must be of such kind as to make this possible" (*ibid:* 289).

The World as Sacramental

Taking incarnation of the Word of God to mean the continuous immanence of God in Creation brings into focus the universal presence and activity of the Divine Spirit in the material world (or world of matter). In Christian understanding and belief, the world of matter has both the symbolic function of expressing the mind or spirit of God and the instrumental function of being the means whereby the Holy Spirit brings about the Divine purpose. In this context, we can say, broadly, that the world is a sacrament or, at least, is sacramental (*Ibid*). We could put this another way, by stating, after Temple (1934), that the created world is seen by Christians as a symbol because it is a mode of God's revelation, an expression of God's truth and beauty which are the 'spiritual' aspects of its reality. There is no disagreement within the Anglican Church of the double character of the created physical elements in all the sacraments (water in baptism, bread and wine in the Eucharist) and correspondingly, of their meaning. In terms of the Earth, in the words of Barth (1958: 95) ". . . creation is the external basis of the covenant". Barth's point implies that material creation is symbolic of God's covenant.

Implications of the Re-assessed Christian Perspective of the Natural World

Consideration of Creation as an expression of God brings about a deeper sense of the Divine presence in the natural world and challenges the way in which we relate to it.

Applications for Ministry

Spiritual Growth

We do not have to have faith in and a relationship with God in order to be 'environmentally aware', just as we do not have to have faith in God in order to be concerned about and act to reduce poverty, pain and brutality towards vulnerable persons. What difference does our faith make? Clear statements are made that what is done to the poor, the sick, the dispossessed, the stigmatized, the imprisoned is done to Christ (Matthew Chapter 25). This guides our actions towards such persons from a very different perspective. For it brings a whole new dimension to our knowing God and our relationship with the divine, as well as a different understanding of ourselves and our purpose in the community of humankind. This has its parallel in seeing Christ in the natural world. For once we understand the earth as creation, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, then our actions towards the earth take on a very different meaning, as they now reflect our relationship with God. This opens up the arena for gaining a deeper understanding of God, of creation and of ourselves as part of creation and as inheritors of the Earth. It makes practical sense of the Beatitude: "Blessed are the meek (Blessed are the 'gentle in the New American Standard Bible) for they shall inherit the Earth" (Matthew 5:5).

Commitment to Justice for and in the Environment

It is the hope that an enhanced personal spirituality following from renewed concern and motivations for care of God's Creation will provide inspiration, vision and moral leadership in the commitment to justice – both for the planetary environment and thereby humans within it. Mission also has to be pragmatic and we must be able to translate our re-evaluation of the natural world as Creation and all that it represents in terms of God's covenant, into actions that promote justice.

There has been a general failure of the church to recognize the connections between justice for the environment and justice for people. In other words, the 5th Mark of Mission is intrinsically connected to the 4th Mark of Mission: To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation.

First, we have missed the connection between love of neighbour and love of environment. Second, the model of the world as God's body encourages holistic attitudes of responsibility for and care of the vulnerable and the oppressed (McFague 1987; 2001). Here we need to include as vulnerable and oppressed, both – people and natural environment.

Nature has become co-victim with the poor. The environment, like the poor, is a victim of overuse, inequitable consumption and over-exploitation. Environmental justice thus combines the existing concern of mission for social justice with concern for the environment, not least as it affects the impact of environmental degradation on the poor. Poisoning the environment (for example, through contamination from toxins and radioactive materials) as well as flooding and mudslides, food insecurity and hunger resulting from environmental over-exploitation disproportionately affect the poor. Besides, this powerfully demonstrates that to think that the human can benefit by a deleterious exploitation of the Earth is an absurdity. "The well-being of the Earth is primary. Human well-being is derivative" (T. Berry 1988/2015).

What is often missing from the environmental discourse is the issue of global poverty and oppression which occurs alongside the suffering of planet earth. This connection is reflected in Rt Rev Richard Chartres, Bishop of London's warning of the global 'peril' due to crises in the environment, poverty and conflict. He calls for a willingness to embrace radical ideas in order to avert disaster in the next 50 years.[7]

Mission in the Context of Community

This understanding of the connection between environmental justice and social justice promotes mission in the context of community. Boff (1995), actively sought to integrate a theology of liberation with environmental concern writing from his experience of the threatened Amazon forest. The task ahead, he maintains, is to heal the 'broken alliance' between humanity and nature, individuals and community. Understanding the environment as creation advocates that being in right relation with the natural world is part of being in right relation to each other. Moreover, it demands the just sharing of limited resources and the 'real cost' of environmental usage.

Stewardship of the Earth Reviewed

The Renaissance and Reformation introduced the modern concept of a steward with a responsibility to care for Creation. Undoubtedly, stewardship still remains the most common model used in the Church today to describe the desired role of humankind on Earth. Detailed discussion on the appropriateness of this term in the present context is outside the scope of this paper. Therefore, while it is not elaborated upon here, the point will simply be made that 'stewardship', it has been argued, "can represent an easy retreat to a comfortable concept, which avoids coming to terms with deeper philosophical and theological issues inextricably woven into the environmental crisis" (Palmer, 2006: 65).

From a theological perspective, first, the steward, who protected the master's money instead of investing it, was severely admonished (Luke 16: 1-13). This could lead people to the expansive use of resources to create economic value which is already at the root of much degradation. Secondly, the master goes away and is not involved with the use of the money until he returns to collect it. This does not readily accommodate our view of God's continuing presence in the world rather than as an absentee or distant deity. Also, it is not appropriate to speak of a master indwelling his steward. Furthermore, the persisting dualism which separates God from the world in people's consciousness is reinforced by the concept of steward as manager of the Earth. The concept of steward could also suggest the dangerous connotation of 'control over the environment' which should be avoided, given the lingering concepts relating to human dominion over nature previously indicated. While the term stewardship is appropriate with regard to matters of managing finance, it would be advisable for its use with regard to the environment be re-considered.

Based on the re-assessed Theology of Creation, there are other perspectives on the role of humankind in Creation which represent humans in a closer, more intimate relationship with the Creator and Creation and which should be explored. These include humankind as: priest of creation; interpreter of creation; trustee and preserver of creation; co-creator and co-worker with God the Creator; fellow-sufferer in creation (Peacock *op.cit*).

Conclusion

It is important to understand that the point of the 5th Mark of Mission is not simply to do with what people mistakenly regard as being 'environmentally friendly' (being nice to birds and lizards and cultivating flowers). Nor is the point of this Mark of Mission to require the Church to foster responsible environmental behaviour for the sole purpose and motive of promoting the sustainability of the current world order of development; nor for saving money by conserving energy, water and other resources. As summed up by Gottlieb: "The environmental crisis challenges us not just to save our skins, but to discern anew what we are doing with our lives" (Gottlieb 2007: 6): What is needed is a new perspective on the nature of our humanity and our spirituality. Gaining new understanding of Creation as the primary revelation of the divine should then guide our relationship with God through our relationship with the natural world. It is only through that kind of spiritual disposition that our actions in the natural world fulfill our proper God-given role within creation and become an imperative in our lives which can be reflected in the Church's mission and ministry for our time.

The environmental crisis demands far more than 'rational management' (Perschel 2002, cited in Gottlieb *op.cit*). Perschel contends that we have no hope unless we infuse the debate over the environment with the deep emotional and spiritual connections that it warrants and that will be required for a great social transformation. The point of the Fifth Mark of Mission then is to engage the church in this new theological exploration and consciousness. The environment has long been regarded as an additional option for those interested in 'that sort of thing', as though being God's agents on Earth is an option for the few and irrelevant to the personal calling of all Christians. But since we are all commissioned to be God's agents, the fifth Mark reminds us all that to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth is a critical part of the Church's mission, if it is that our mission is to seek to bring about a new world order, characterized by love, peace and justice for all.

Notes

1. The terms nature, natural world, the earth and natural environment are here used interchangeably.

2. This follows in the tradition emerging in the 'Enlightenment' of the 18th century, in which justification was supported for private, unequal and unlimited property rights.

3. See, for example, Hosea 2:21; Jeremiah 31:12; Isaiah 65: 17.

4. See, for example, John 1, Colossians 1, and Hebrews 1.

5. See, for example, Romans 8:19 and 1Cor.15:23-28.

6. See, for example, Job 38: 4 and 39:9.

7. Ruth Gledhill, *Christian Today* Contributing Editor, 16 April 2015. www.christiantoday.com/article/bishop.of.london/

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