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Environmental Ethics – RASNET

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QUESTION 1. Why is the environmental crisis an ethical issue?

Environmental issues are fundamentally to do with ethics because:

- Environmental problems are ‘wicked’ problems – difficult to tackle.
- People, all people, are potentially affected by environmental issues.
- Environmental issues are complex, touching all aspects of human society and culture – politics, economics, religion, science, arts, etc.

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People hold differing values or worldviews therefore it is hard to find clear agreement over either how much of a problem environmental issues pose or over how they are to be addressed.¹ The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said ‘As we think, we live’ which means that our worldview or values determine much of what we do in daily life. The wide spectrum of attitudes to the environment includes some of the following positions which are not distinct but will often overlap with neighbouring ones:

- Position A. The earth is precious and vital: all life depends on the proper functioning of ecosystems. The whole planet faces an unprecedented and life-threatening crisis requiring urgent and fundamental changes in how people, especially Western people, think and live. Reducing fossil fuel use is important but so are other crucial ecological crises which are related to climate change such as deforestation, plastic waste in oceans, over-fishing, loss of biodiversity and so on, and these must also be urgently addressed (Extinction Rebellion, Greta Thunberg).
- Position B. People are not living in a way that is good for the health of the planet or for human wellbeing. We face a major crisis which must be resolved through environmental action which will also establish a more equitable society – e.g. green public transport systems and self-sufficient local communities. (the ‘Green New Deal’ of Naomi Klein and US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez).
- Position C. Social justice is fundamental. Whatever environmental problems exist they are deeply related to underlying injustices and inequalities between rich and poor which need to be addressed by encouraging poor countries to develop (the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals).
- Position D. Humans thrive by using technology and we are good at controlling nature. Climate change is the biggest environmental problem, and renewable energy technology in

¹ There is not even a completely clear agreement that climate change even exists, though there are now few actual climate change deniers. Neither is there complete agreement that it is human behaviour that has caused environmental problems, though again this is an increasingly accepted position.

conjunction with certain policy changes can probably fix it without the need to make radical changes to how people live or to the way the economy basically works (Ross Garnaut, Paul Hawken).²

- Position E. Climate change can be addressed by strategies such as building an 'ark' so people can leave Earth (Project Persephone) or through large scale geo-engineering solutions (Bjørn Lomborg).

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Environmental questions are ethical questions because they invite fundamental philosophical, theological and ethical reflection on how, and for what purpose, human beings are to live on a threatened planet. Hence there are religious and spiritual approaches to environmental ethics such as:

- Iranian philosopher Seyyed Nasr argues that the magnitude of re-thinking that is required of people today is so great that it amounts to 'a death and rebirth of the modern person and their worldview'.³
- Pope Francis says: 'Many things have to change course, but it is we human beings above all who need to change ... A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal.'⁴
- Australian scholar David Tacey says, '... we cannot have a moral revolution without also having a spiritual revolution.'⁵

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QUESTION 2: Debate about environmental issues in Christianity

Christianity has always debated ethical questions.⁶ But ecological questions as such are modern.⁷ We cannot 'read back' environmental or ecological ethics as such in ancient texts or societies. Even today, there is no single set of agreed upon environmental ethics in the churches, any more than

² While a strong uptake of renewable energy and electric cars addresses one aspect of carbon emissions, those technologies themselves require massive use of minerals and increase pollution. See George Monbiot, "After the Failure of Cop26, There's Only One Last Hope for Our Survival," *The Guardian*, 15 November 2021.

³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature: The 1994 Cadbury Lectures at the University of Birmingham* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁴ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (Strathfield NSW: St Pauls Publications, 2015).

⁵ David J Tacey, *Re-Enchantment: The New Australian Spirituality* (Sydney: Harper Collins, 2000). A similar point is made by many others such as Clifford Chalmers Cain, *An Ecological Theology: Reunderstanding Our Relation to Nature*, vol. 98, Toronto Studies in Theology (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2009); Lawrence Sullivan, "Preface," in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter T Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, Religions of the World and Ecology (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Ernst M. Conradie, "Foreword," in *An Inconvenient Text: Is a Green Reading of the Bible Possible?*, ed. Norman Habel (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2009).

⁶ The early church pondered what kind of food is allowable and whether usury is acceptable. In the eighteenth century there was the question of slavery. Today euthanasia, etc.

⁷ The term 'ecology' was first used in 1866 by German scientist Ernst Haeckel but its current common use derives only indirectly from the science of ecology and primarily from its use by the environmental movement – the environmental movement is usually dated from the 1960s and particularly from the publication of Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962).

there is in wider western society. But there are many responses from within Christian churches by theologians, church bodies, and church leaders.⁸

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An important contribution to debate within the churches comes from ecological theology (ecotheology).⁹ Spread across denominations, ecotheology arose alongside the environmental movement.¹⁰ It affirms a three-way relationship between God, nature and humankind and acknowledges that the Earth belongs to God, not to human beings. Ecotheology is a broad field and adopts various ethical approaches. Here are three:

- **Human-centred ethics** can: emphasise humans as the highest form of evolved life (Teilhard de Chardin);¹¹ see humans as stewards of creation (Francis Schaeffer)¹² or as priests, mediating between heaven and earth (Philip Sherrard);¹³ emphasise social justice, noting that environmental devastation hits the poor and vulnerable first and worst (Laudato Si'); focus on relationality or inter-connectedness to promote an ethic of equity between men and women, between races and between human and non-human species (Rosemary Radford Ruether).
- **Ecocentric ethics** takes seriously both ecosystemic flourishing and underlying spiritual and moral problems deriving from human alienation from nature. John Cobb and Charles Hartshorne employ an organic and evolutionary philosophy (process thought) in which every event is organically related to the total environment in a process guided by God who is in every event and is affected by every event and who 'lures' the universe by love.¹⁴
- **An ethic of the relational self** sees relationality, connectivity and care as the basis of human moral life (Michael Northcott).¹⁵ Creation has an ongoing relationship with God, and God loves all creation (James Nash). This approach to ethics situates the quest for the good within relationships, responsibilities, communities and places/habitats.

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⁸ There has also been a good deal of practical action: solar panels on church roofs, carbon 'fasting' during Lent etc, but that goes beyond the scope of this paper.

⁹ Prior to the specific development of environmental ethics in the 1970s, many indigenous cultures had held and expressed environmental ethics, and Western thinkers too had pre-empted them such as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir and Aldo Leopold.

¹⁰ It is also to some extent a response to the well-known criticism made by Lynn White, now more than 50 years ago, that Christianity has been too human-centred. The question of whether Christianity has anthropocentric roots and thereby does not view nature positively is very complex. One excellent text H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1985) shows how scripture and theology regard nature at times negatively, at other times positively, and often indifferently.

¹¹ Teilhard's early twentieth-century optimism and confidence in technology and progress does not quite fit with current ecological understandings, although some thinkers such as Thomas Berry and Sean McDonagh have taken parts of Teilhard's thought in a more environmental direction.

¹² Other ecotheologians disagree, seeing stewardship as focusing on mastery, control or management of nature. Some suggest we see ourselves as 'co-creators' with God. Others emphasise a greater need for reverence or humility.

¹³ The priesthood model implicitly critiques the way that the scientist has taken the place of the priest, bringing to birth a consumerist society.

¹⁴ John B Cobb, Jr, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Belfast: Christian Journals, 1976).

¹⁵ Michael S Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 116ff.

It's not only theologians who have responded to the ecological crisis but church bodies too. There is global ecumenical response from the World Council of Churches which speaks of 'The Integrity of Creation' and there are other organisations such as A'Rocha. Within Australia there is the interfaith group Australian Religious Response to Climate Change and many denominations have national and global environmental networks.¹⁶

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A number of church leaders have made strong and positive statements, here is a small sample:

- The Eastern Orthodox Church has for decades been a strong environmental advocate.¹⁷ Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew acknowledges the importance of connecting with the natural world, advocating 'a way of loving, of moving gradually away from what I want to what God's world needs. It is liberation from fear, greed and compulsion. It is regaining a sense of wonder, being filled with a sense of goodness, seeing all things in God, and God in all things.'¹⁸
- A highly influential document not only within but far beyond the Roman Catholic church is the 2015 papal encyclical *Laudato Si'*, where Pope Francis, citing Benedict XVI, notes that at the heart of both the Western existential crisis and the environmental crisis is a deep sense of brokenness or dislocation, which invites a theological or spiritual response: 'The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast'.¹⁹ One of the strong aspect of Christian ecological ethics as stated by Pope Francis is the recognition that the question of planetary limits is intricately related to concerns of social justice. Creation is a gift expressing God's free and loving choice and it reveals God who is: 'intimately present to each being ... His divine presence ... ensures the subsistence and growth of each being'.²⁰ Francis also emphasizes the interconnectivity of all that is.²¹
- For Anglican Archbishop and theologian Rowan Williams what we must not do is see 'relationships centred upon *us*, upon our individual or group agendas, as the determining factor in how we approach persons or things'.²² Like Pope Francis, Williams notes that one important aspect is to keep in view 'how much injustice is let loose by any given set of economic or manufacturing practices'.²³
- The Uniting Church regards climate change as a serious threat to the future and integrity of life on earth and its commitment to the environment is based in 'the Christian belief that God, as the Creator of the universe, calls us into a special relationship with the creation – a

¹⁶ For example the UCA's Uniting Justice, Catholic Earthcare, and the Anglican Communion Environmental Network.

¹⁷ Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has received many environmental awards and established the Orthodox Church's *Religious and Scientific Committee* which has hosted many international, interdisciplinary and inter-religious symposia. See John Chryssavgis, "The Green Patriarch: Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and the Protection of the Environment," *Ecumenical Patriarchate*, <https://www.patriarchate.org/the-green-patriarch>

¹⁸ "Environmental Justice and Peace: Quotes by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew," *Ecumenical Patriarchate*, <https://www.patriarchate.org/bartholomew-quotes>

¹⁹ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 217.

²⁰ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 76-77, and at 69.

²¹ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 92.

²² Rowan Williams, "Renewing the Face of the Earth: Human Responsibility and the Environment," in *The Ebor Lectures* (York2009).

²³ Williams, "Renewing the Face of the Earth: Human Responsibility and the Environment."

relationship of mutuality and interdependence. We believe that God's will for the earth is renewal and reconciliation, not destruction by human beings'.²⁴

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Question 3 The ethical perspectives and moral judgments within Christian faith

Authorities

- Throughout the two thousand year Christian tradition, and especially within the modern era, no single Christian authority determines all ethical perspectives and judgements. Today although denominational leaders do make public statements on ethical issues there is often less difference between denominational viewpoints than in the past.
- Within Christianity there are at least five sources of authority. **Scripture** is almost always foundational, and especially for churches in the Protestant, Reformed and Evangelical traditions. **Tradition** (the practice and teaching of the church) is especially associated with Roman Catholicism which prioritises Papal pronouncements, and Eastern Orthodoxy which appeals strongly to the decisions of the historical Ecumenical Councils. Anglicans too take tradition with utmost seriousness. **Experience** (one's own sense of encounter with God) is especially important in Charismatic or Pentecostal churches. **Reason** (taking into account philosophy, science, changes in social ideas) features across many traditions. **Conscience** features strongly for Quakers and elsewhere.
- In some denominations a degree of influence comes from the lives of Saints and Holy People who have lived ethically: in the modern era we might think of Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

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Norms

Norms express a shared cultural understanding for people at a particular time and are subject to change: it would be hard to find a Christian today who would endorse things which were at one time norms e.g. slavery, the Crusades or many aspects of the Inquisition. Some cultural norms do not necessarily have a Christian base. New norms are not necessarily grounded in any valid set of ethics.

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Values and Ideas

Values and ideas are more significant than norms in forming the basis of an ethical system or principle. Values and ideas also change, for example many Anglican churches have in recent decades ordained women as priests and bishops. Sometimes the values expressed by churches cohere with the main values of society, sometimes they are at odds with them. In Christianity values and ideas are grounded in:

- Belief in God as original and ongoing creator and in creation as fundamentally good ('God saw that it was good' Genesis 1). Moral values are enshrined in the inherent order and rationality of creation, the cosmos has moral purpose, and the human quest for goodness is related to the goodness of creation. The doctrine of creation gives Christians grounds for taking ethics seriously since we believe that the life of the world is not fortuitous but the

²⁴ Uniting Justice Australia, "Public Statement About Climate Change," Uniting Church in Australia Assembly, <https://www.unitingjustice.org.au/environment/about>.

products of a loving God. This provides the basis for the idea of natural law, the idea held by the Hebrew prophets, St Paul, and Aquinas, that much of what can be known about God and about how we are to live can be known from our reasoned observation of the natural order.²⁵ While to modern ears any kind of 'law' as the basis for ethics may sound harsh or rule-bound, it can be a basic way of looking at existence that is flexible and creative.²⁶ When it is seen as the ground of the way the cosmos operates, as fixed in reality itself, law can be affirmed as the basis of many cultures including Indigenous culture.²⁷

- The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In scripture, Jesus' teaching and his way of living and dying, his practices of healing, caring for the marginal and his reluctance to judge others are foundational for Christian ethics.²⁸ The Incarnation of God in Jesus is central to Christianity. It expresses God's love for the physical, material world.²⁹
- The ongoing power of the presence of the Holy Spirit.³⁰ The Spirit operates in community (the church) – over two thousand years the value of community has been central for Christianity – the idea that religion can be private or personal is very recent.
- In general, Christian ethical behaviour embraces: care for the vulnerable; the giving of oneself for others; the centrality of love; the golden rule of treating others as you would like to be treated; the value of life.³¹ In many ways the values developed in the twentieth century as Catholic social teaching express the ethics of many Christians today.³²

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²⁵ For Aquinas we know God a) through the order of things (natural theology) and b) through the revelation of God in the Bible (the knowledge of faith, the life of Christ). Therefore both nature and faith guide us in how to live.

²⁶ John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 1977 ed. (London: SCM, 1966), 505-06.

²⁷ Anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose, cites a senior Yarralin (NT) man explaining that under Aboriginal Law there are no exceptions: 'You see that hill over there? Blackfellow Law like that hill. It never changes. Whitefellow law goes this way, that way, all the time changing. Blackfellow Law different. It never changes. Blackfellow Law hard – like a stone, like that hill. The Law is in the ground.' Rather than being about rules, Aboriginal Law may be said, like natural law, to be fundamentally about relationships: 'Dreamings determined sets of moral relationships – country to country, country to plant and animal species, people to country, people to species, people to people. Individuals of any species come and go, but the underlying relationships persist. ... To disregard the Law would be to disregard the sources of life and thus to allow the cosmos to fall apart.' Deborah Bird Rose, *Dingo Makes Us Human: Life and Land in an Aboriginal Australian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 56.

²⁸ It should be noted that scripture does not always have a straightforward meaning and can often be interpreted in more than one way, for example 'turning the other cheek' in Matthew 5:39 which Tertullian saw as totally pacifist but Augustine saw as to do not with bodily action but with inward disposition.

²⁹ Bodies feature prominently in Christianity, for example the physicality of Jesus's work of feeding and healing people, his bodily death and resurrection, the claim that the church is the 'body of Christ', the use of sacraments, etc. And even (though this is contested) the metaphor has been suggested of seeing the world as the body of God. Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993). Because God is incarnate in Jesus Christ, the world of matter both expresses God's mind and is the means by which God acts (Arthur Peacocke and John Habgood).

³⁰ John Macquarrie summarises Christian ethics as grounded in a sense of divine presence and demanding love, compassion and altruism.

³¹ The three famous Christian virtues are faith (awareness of divine presence), hope (enthusiasm and confidence for our moral actions) and love (aiming for a community of love – the Kingdom of God).

³² The essentials of Catholic social teaching are: the life and dignity of the human person; a call to family, community and participation; rights and responsibilities; the option for the poor and vulnerable; the dignity and rights of workers; solidarity; care of God's creation

In environmental ethics, greater emphasis is given to relationship between people and creation.³³ Although we cannot expect to find direct reference to ecological ethics in an ancient text, scripture can be interpreted in relation to contemporary issues, for example, the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) teaches care for the neighbour: in response to the question Who is my neighbour? ecotheology today might say the Earth is our neighbour – and that we can take responsibility towards Earth, for example changing behaviour to reduce carbon emissions. Similarly, when Jesus teaches his followers to tend to the poor and needy (Matthew 25:31-36) we might reflect on the way that poor nations and people are usually the first and worst impacted by ecological devastation. The Christian ethical principle of the sanctity of life which was once restricted to human beings is tentatively being extended to the other than human, for example in enjoining kindness and compassion towards animals, in contrast to the indignities they suffer in factory farming (theologian Andrew Linzey.)

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Question 4: How Christian ethics responds to three common ethical decision-making options

Environmental questions are still too recently fixed, at least at the level of popular discourse, to have elicited anything like a systematic set of ethics in Christianity.³⁴ I will draw on one ecotheological ethicist for his responses to what are today three major ethical options, although it should be noted that these three ethical options are not easily or clearly separated.

- Deontological ('ought', necessary, imperative) ethics are absolutist and about duty, rights and inherent value (Kant's categorical imperative). Something is wrong if it is against the law of nature, or against God's will, or breaks a Commandment. Goodness just *is*. Although influential in the past, including within the Christian tradition, this approach is not particularly useful for addressing the moral question of how people are to actually live together ecologically or socially.³⁵ It fails to address the underlying problem of the alienation between human beings living in modernity and the natural world.³⁶
- In consequentialist, teleological, utilitarian or pragmatic ethics, morality is not autonomous (as it is in deontological ethics) but is a means to something else – the value of an action exists only in its positive effects. It undergirds today's very common 'costs-benefits' approach, suiting a legal, bureaucratic and economic style. It has had less historical influence in Christian ethics.³⁷ Although it is quite common in environmental management approaches, it can be ecologically problematic because it simply aggregates the sum of costs and benefits arising from a particular development project, rather than focussing on its

³³ Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, 165.

³⁴ Although many environmental issues were identified during the twentieth century (not least the Club of Rome report 'Limits to Growth' in 1972 which identified climate change), environmental concern has not been taken up by the wider population until more recent decades, and the churches, like the rest of society, have been relatively slow to respond.

³⁵ Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, 102.

³⁶ Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, 105.

³⁷ This is in part because it is relatively recent and also because it focuses on the pursuit of pleasure (as distinct from happiness) and therefore is not fundamentally compatible with Christian values. However, it is so influential today that it is probably fair to say it is often an automatic, unthinking or unconscious approach shared by many, Christians included (whose moral sources are of course formed not only by Christianity but by the society we live in).

effects upon the particular individuals or communities whose lives may be most dramatically affected by it, and it can often ignore the well-being of other-than-human actors.³⁸

- In personalist/character/virtue ethics morality is an expression of feeling, conscience or love and the focus is on building moral character. Although today it has an individualist and situational aspect, it has some connection with the notion of natural law, claiming that humans are capable of rationality and discernment therefore of moral choice. It resonates with the ethic of acting rightly, of virtue. As Laudato Si' says: 'Only by cultivating sound virtues will people be able to make a selfless ecological commitment.' Whereas the deontological and consequentialist approaches can be codified in law, virtue ethics cannot. It has been especially attractive to Christianity because it fits with the writings of Paul and the life and teachings of Jesus both of which challenge legalism, and because it fits in with the over-riding command to love.³⁹

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I conclude with this quotation from Laudato Si': What Christians need is an "ecological conversion", whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them. Living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience.'

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³⁸ Though as Northcott notes, Peter Singer extends a highly influential moral argument to animals And Robin Attfield finds intrinsic value in non-sensate life forms. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, 90-97.

³⁹ Michael Northcott points out that this category of ethics fits with the kind of ecocentric approach which emphasises the moral significance of the wider community of life exemplified in Aldo Leopold's land ethic: 'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise'. It has some correspondence with the Gaia hypothesis (James Lovelock) which sees earth as a whole living organism and self-regulating system and with Arne Naess's deep ecology which sees human self-interest in ecological terms, rejecting utilitarian individualism, but both Gaia and deep ecology can be seen as contradictory to the Christian tradition because they prioritise ecosystemic over human flourishing - Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, 105-115. Specifically, for Northcott, the ecological importance of virtue ethics can be listed as having eight aspects: Love for God, for persons and for all created things in their diversity, balancing our cravings for materiality, luxury and security; Justice – oppression is exerted on the poor and on the non-human parts of creation; Temperance - the right ordering of human appetites and learning to distinguish between need and luxury; Prudence – thinking of our own welfare and that of following generations and using caution in mobilising technology; Fidelity – respecting and conserving relations with people and places that have given us life; Courage/fortitude – to reform aspects of society, politics and economics that are ecologically destructive; Hope – the belief that we can change direction; and Peaceableness – avoiding conflict over scarce resources and in relation to human control. This approach to ethics challenges individualism and the supremacy of the market. It situates the quest for the good within relationships, responsibilities, communities and places/habitats

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