

Environmental Ethics and Christianity

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Question 1:

Why are environmental issues ethical issues?

Environmental issues are fundamentally to do with ethics for three reasons:

- They are 'wicked' problems – difficult to tackle, and there is little or no agreement around them
- All people are potentially affected by environmental issues
- Environmental issues are broad, massive and complex, touching many aspects of human life/society



Question 1:

Why are environmental issues ethical issues?

The whole planet faces an unprecedented and life-threatening crisis requiring urgent and fundamental changes in how people think/live

A

We face a major crisis and need environmental action plus a more equitable society, a Green New Deal

B

Social justice is fundamental. Priority should be given to helping poor countries develop

C

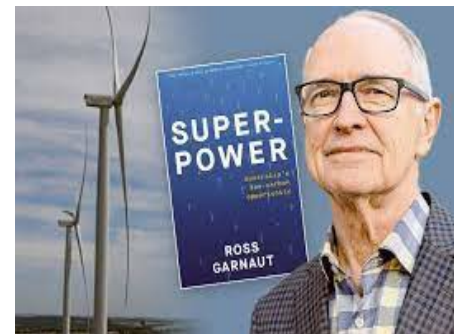
Climate change is the biggest problem and renewable energy technology is the urgent answer

D

Responses to climate change include building an 'ark' in space or large scale geo-engineering solutions

E

A spectrum of worldviews about the environment – five sample positions



Question 1:

Why are environmental issues ethical issues?

Questions of ecology invite fundamental philosophical, religious, spiritual and ethical reflection on how, and for what purpose, human beings are to live on a planet increasingly seen as threatened



- 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’ (Iranian philosopher Seyyed Nasr)
- ‘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’ (Pope Francis)
- ‘... we cannot have a moral revolution without also having a spiritual revolution’ (Australian scholar David Tacey)

Question 2: Debate about environmental issues in Christianity

Ecotheology

Ecotheology affirms a three-way relationship between God, nature and humankind and acknowledges that the Earth belongs to God, not to human beings.

There are roughly three ethical approaches:

- Humancentric
- Ecocentric
- Relationality



The triangular paradigm of ecotheology:
God, Nature, Humans in relationship

Question 2:

Debate about environmental issues in Christianity

Response from Church bodies

- International ecumenical responses (World Council of Churches: 'The Integrity of Creation'; A'Rocha)
- National interfaith response (Australian Religious Response to Climate Change)
- Denominational local, national and global networks (Uniting Church, Catholic, Anglican)



Question 2:

Debate about environmental issues in Christianity

Some representative responses from Church leaders

- Eastern Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew: ‘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.’
- Pope Francis in *Laudato Si’* cites Benedict XVI: ‘The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast’. Creation reveals God who is: ‘intimately present to each being ... His divine presence ... ensures the subsistence and growth of each being’.
- 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’. 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’.
- 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 relationship of mutuality and interdependence. We believe that God’s will for the earth is renewal and reconciliation, not destruction by human beings’.

Question 3:

Ethical perspectives and moral judgments within Christian faith

Sources of authority

- Within Christianity there are at least five sources of authority:

Scripture

Tradition

Experience

Reason

Conscience

- There are also the lives of those seen as Saints and Holy People (ancient and modern) whose lives are based in ethical living



Martin Luther King Jr, leader of the US civil rights movement

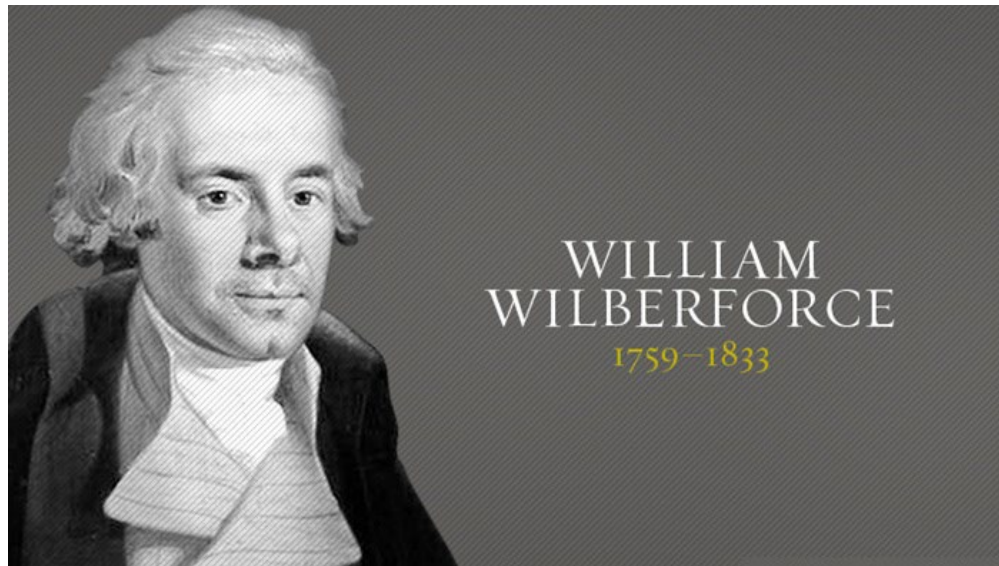


Dorothy Day, social justice campaigner and founder of the Catholic Worker Movement

Question 3:

Ethical perspectives and moral judgments within Christian faith

Norms



Wilberforce: A Christian who was instrumental in reforming slavery

Norms can change with the times

Some norms do not necessarily have a Christian base

New norms may not be grounded in any valid set of ethics

Question 3:

Ethical perspectives and moral judgments within Christian faith

Values and Ideas – Christianity

Christian values and ideas relate to:

- Belief in God as creator and in creation as fundamentally good. Creation has order. The life of the world is the product of a loving God. Natural law: 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
- The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Incarnation of God in Jesus expresses God's love for the world
- The ongoing power of the presence of the Holy Spirit operating in community/relationship
- Christian ethics involves: 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

Question 3

Ethical perspectives and moral judgments within Christian faith

Values and Ideas – Christianity in relation to environment

Scripture can be interpreted to help understand contemporary issues, e.g.:

- The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) – Earth as neighbour
- Jesus teaches his followers to tend to the poor and needy (Matthew 25:31-36) – climate change and poverty



Solomon Islands: Erosion has forced entire communities to abandon their villages.

(Photo: ABC, Supplied: Simon Arthur)

Question 4

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

The three options are not always distinct and in practice often intersect. For Christian environmental ethics the third option is probably the strongest.

- Deontological ('ought', necessary, imperative) ethics do not necessarily address either the moral question of how people are to actually live together or the problematic sense of alienation between human beings and the natural world
- Consequentialist, teleological, utilitarian or pragmatic ethics, although common and influential today, can fail to consider the wellbeing of individuals or communities and often ignore the well-being of other-than-human actors
- Personalist/character/virtue ethics connects with the notion of natural law: humans are capable of rationality and discernment therefore of moral choice. It resonates with the ethic of acting rightly, of virtue. Attractive to Christianity - fits in with the over-riding command to love



Unattributed image of Saint Francis of Assisi's Canticle of the Sun from the website of Sisters of St. Francis of the Neumann Communities

‘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.’

Pope Francis, Laudato Si’