

# JESUS AND THE NATURAL WORLD

EXPLORING A CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO ECOLOGY

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## A new way of being on Earth

In 1968, astronaut William Anders took a beautiful photograph of Earth rising above the Moon. He was one of the three crew members of the Apollo 8 mission, the first human beings to leave Earth orbit, and the first to orbit the Moon. The image Anders captured, called 'Earthrise', has been described as one of the photographs that changed the world. In describing what they saw on that mission, astronaut James Lovell said, 'In the whole universe, wherever we looked, the only bit of color was back on Earth...It was the most beautiful thing there was to see in all the heavens' (LIFE 1969). Since then we have seen many pictures of Earth as a small, blue, green and white planet set against the darkness of interstellar space.

Unlike other generations of human beings, unlike Plato, St Augustine, or Newton, we can now picture our planet as a whole. We have heard astronauts describe what it is like to look at Earth from space and to realise that this relatively small, vulnerable planet contains all that they hold precious, all of humanity's life and culture, all of human love, and all the other diverse and beautiful forms of life we know. This view of Earth constitutes a new moment in our cultural history. It brings with it a new appreciation of Earth's hospitality to life. It offers us an imaginative picture of one global community of life, of one human family, which is deeply interconnected not only with all the other species of our planet, but also with all its life systems.

At the same moment in human history, we are faced with the knowledge that we are doing great harm to the forests, the land, the rivers, the seas and the atmosphere of Earth. Mainstream science indicates that use of fossil fuels, along with other human actions, is contributing to climate change that will bring suffering to millions of poor human beings living in vulnerable areas, and accelerate the extinction of many other species. In many parts of the planet, we are destroying habitats and losing species that make up the diversity of life on Earth. We are betraying our responsibility to other life forms and our obligations to future generations of human beings. If we continue along the way of ruthless exploitation of the land, the forests, the rivers and the seas, we will pass on to our children and grandchildren an impoverished planet, depriving them of what has brought beauty, joy and wonder to human beings, and nurtured their art and their spirituality.

The good news is that many people around the globe have begun to recognise that we are called to a new way of being on Earth. There is an ever-growing movement of people who are connected in a deepening commitment to the good of the community of life on Earth. It is a movement that includes people living in large cities, country towns and on the land, farmers, artists, school children, scientists, industrialists, politicians and religious leaders. Many have undergone, and are still undergoing, a process of conversion as they come to see more clearly that creation is a precious gift that is to be loved, respected and protected. This conversion is a change of mind and heart that involves a deepening respect for other species, and for their habitats, and a commitment to their flourishing in an interrelated global community of life. It involves a commitment to hand on to future generations the bounty of our planet.

For Christians, of course, the deepest reason for this conversion is that we see the Earth and all its creatures as God's good creation, the creation that God radically embraces in the incarnation of the Word made flesh. Because of this, in 2001, Pope John Paul II stressed the importance of the change of mind and of life that he called 'ecological conversion'. After speaking of the way humans have devastated so much of the natural world, he continued: 'We must therefore encourage and support the "ecological conversion" which in recent decades has made humanity more sensitive to the catastrophe to which it has been heading.' (*General Audience*, 17 January 2001, par. 4).

Shortly afterwards, he joined with the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Orthodox Church, Bartholomew I, to describe the various levels of this ecological conversion:

*A solution at the economic level can be found only if we undergo, in the most radical way, an inner change of heart, which can lead to a change in lifestyle and a change of unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. A genuine conversion in Christ will enable us to change the way we think and act (Common Declaration, 10 June 2002).*

Ecological conversion, then, is the radical change of mind and heart that leads to a deeper love and respect for all creatures as having their own integrity before God; it involves change to a sustainable lifestyle, to sustainable patterns of production and consumption, and to sustainable economic and political choices.

This movement of ecological conversion involves people from all kinds of religious backgrounds. In spite of its obvious human limitations and sinfulness, this movement can be understood as a new form of global spirituality, and in Christian terms as a work of the Holy Spirit. The Creator Spirit who breathed life into the whole creation from the beginning, the Holy Spirit who is the very Breath of Life, now breathes through our human community calling us to a new respect for life, for each and every human being in all their unique dignity, and for all the other creatures who share this planet with us. This Spirit of God calls us to love and respect the great ancient trees in old-growth forests, the unknown insects in rainforests, the threatened species of birds and fish, the great whales of the Southern Ocean. We Christians are called to humbly stand with others who may have been involved with care for Earth long before us. But we do this from our own perspective, that of faith in the God revealed in Jesus Christ, and this God's love for all Earth's creatures.

How do Christians see creation? First, with everybody else on Earth, we learn about creation by observing what the natural world itself tells us, including all the rich insights that come from natural sciences like cosmology, geology and biology. Second, we share with Jewish believers, and with Muslims, the revelation of God as the one Creator and sustainer of the whole universe revealed in the Old Testament. Third, our particularly *Christian* understanding of creation comes from Jesus Christ, from the God revealed in him, in his words and deeds, in his self-giving love that culminates in his death, in his resurrection and in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

For Christians, the compassionate God revealed in the human face of Jesus *is* the God who creates the universe and all its creatures. And the God of creation is the God who is given to us radically in Jesus. God's creation of all things is deeply interconnected with God's presence with us in Christ. God wants to give God's self in love to creatures, so God creates a universe of creatures to which God can give God's self by becoming flesh. Creation and incarnation are interconnected in one great movement of God's self-giving love.



The next section will involve a discussion of the origins of our universe, looking first to what contemporary science tells us and then at what we find in the famous Seven-Day account of creation in the opening chapter of Genesis. After this, it will be helpful to take up other aspects of the biblical theology of creation, before turning directly to Jesus Christ and to the salvation Christians find in him.