



## Script:

This Beginners' Guide will eventually deal with ways in which climate change is impacting the Church, our politics, our cultural institutions and so on. But we will begin by looking at how our Christian teachings - our Christian theology - has formed the way we think about the natural world, and therefore, the way we think about creation care and climate change. We do this because how we think shapes our actions. In this first session, then, we will take a deeply reflective look at ways our inherited Christian theology has taught us to see nature...and we will be asking whether it is time to re-examine what our Christian theology has taught us.

## A. The Creation Story in the Gospel of John

The mystical prologue to the Gospel of John ties together Christ and creation in a remarkable vision that has become a guidepost of our tradition from its earliest days.

The Word (Gk. *logos*), is God in action, creating, revealing, and redeeming. John tells us Jesus Christ is the Word of God become flesh. We have used the Latin term, "*in-carnation*" to describe this. A startling claim, God inhabiting our visible world.

Christians have often reconciled this paradox of Incarnation with our world-view today by saying it is a one-time miracle in Jesus of Nazareth. Going a step further, it has become popular to see Jesus rescuing believers out of this world at the end of time. Doing this, we infer that the rest of the world is barren of spirit - one of our common cultural assumptions. In this view, the natural world and its creatures are of value only as all can be used for the benefit of humans.

The conviction that there are no spirits, or souls, in nature means that "it" can be manipulated, transformed, and utilized - in the literal sense of the term - at will.

At the beginning of the "scientific age" Francis Bacon (1561-1626) wrote of man's conquest of nature in domination terms. Nature was to be "bound" into service" and made a "slave" and "put into constraint." The new science, he compared with a "masculine birth" that will issue in a "blessed race of Heroes and Supermen." [[Quoted in C. Merchant, The Death of Nature, Wildwood, 1982, pp. 168-171]

In the same era, Rene' Descartes insisted that souls were not part of the natural world; all nature was inanimate, soulless, dead, rather than alive. The human body, plants and animals are mere machines. [Rupert Sheldrake, The Rebirth of Nature: The Greening of Science and God, Bantam Books, 1991, pp. 49-53]

These still prevailing views are a startling departure from a Christian view of creation. Look again at John's vision of the Word, universal to all things, "*All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.*" A modern voice, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, in his book, Divine Milieu, helps us see the larger picture, "*By virtue of the Creation and, still more, of the Incarnation, nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see.*" [Harper & Row, p. 30]

The stories of Jesus in the Gospels, show his attitude toward created things when he uses water, bread, fish, wine, light, creatures such as birds of the air, foxes, seed and mud in his parables. Jesus assumed the worth of the created universe, the dependability of nature, the recurrence of seasons, the normal pattern of sowing and harvesting, of planting a vineyard and caring for it, of seeing clouds and counting on the rain. In short, the natural world is the stage where the reign of God is enacted, the place where faith in God with all its dimensions is lived out. [John Klassen, O.S.B, quoted in Steven Chase, Nature as Spiritual Practice, Eerdmans, 2011, p. 80]

**Pause for 5-8 minutes to consider these questions:**

If God can be incarnate in the world, does that make a difference in your perspective of yourself, others, and the natural world?

Do you feel "at home" in the world? Is that a feeling that belief in Jesus' incarnation gives us?

## **B. The shortcomings of a human focused lens on the world**

Fast forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we hear contemporary theologian Elizabeth Johnson say that especially since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both Protestant and Catholic theologians seldom refer to the whole world as God's good creation. Rather, theologians have increasingly focused on the theme of God and the human self, resulting in a more and more estranged relationship between human beings and God's creation- the universe. By taking such an exclusive human focus, Johnson notes, we have for all practical purposes built a theology of redemption separated from creation. She writes that this neglect of the cosmos in mainstream theology blocked "*what should be theology's powerful contribution to the religious praxis of justice and mercy for the threatened earth, so necessary at this moment of our planet's unprecedented ecological crisis.*" [Elizabeth Johnson, "*Turn to the Heavens and the Earth: Retrieval of the Cosmos in Theology*," in The Catholic Theological Society of America: Proceedings of the 51<sup>st</sup> Annual Convention, 1996, p. 1, 5]

With this background in mind, it is easy to understand why the Lutheran theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, argues that Christianity, viewed as a part of cultural history has been a major factor in the ecological crisis. He says, our Western expansion culture is now bringing this crisis to the earth and all its peoples, Christian or not. What follows from this recognition is the need for Christianity, its spirituality and its theology, to be reformed, if we Christians are going to help explore ways out of this crisis. The problem is this: On the way to an ecologically responsible theology, how can we learn, or learn anew, how to see God and human life dynamically and mutually related to the universe? [Jurgen Moltmann, Ethics of Hope,

chapter 9, "Ecology," Fortress Press, 2012, p. 135].

**Pause for 5-8 minutes to consider these questions:**

John 3:16 says, "*God so loved the world...*" Have you understood that primarily about people, or of all creation?

What does God's salvation mean for you? Is it about personal redemption or do you see that as part of God's salvation for all creation?

## C. Three areas for reform of Christian Theology and Spirituality

Moltmann summarizes three specific areas where he sees Christian theology and spirituality needs to be reformed. He speaks on behalf of many theologians today as well as of other Christian traditions which have been neglected or forgotten.

### 1. What we say of God: God is all present.

First, much of Christian thought about God has stressed God's *otherness*, God's *separateness*, or God's *transcendence*. What we need is a renewed picture of God *with us*, God as *all present*. Not to deny God's otherness, but to include both sides of the paradox that is God. A modern example of this effort is Alfred North Whitehead's process theology that has been called, *Panentheism*. God is more than all things but God is in all things and all things are in God.

Christian traditions express this kind of middle way between the extremes of God as wholly other and God simply as all things. Such a way is explicit in the first centuries where God is seen as Trinity, or community. Creation is seen as a continuing process where the Father creates the world through the Son and in the Spirit. The Spirit that sustains all existence and gives life is poured out on the whole creation and forms the creation community. Such a vision was not new but already taught in the Hebrew Testament Wisdom literature. The spirit of God is to be perceived and revered in all things.

Medieval Christian mysticism maintained this "Spirit" view of creation, as we see in the poetry of Hildegard of Bingen. In Trinitarian theology, the community of God with creation, binding all things together, corresponds to the inner community of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, "*creation lives and moves in God*" (Acts 17:28.) [ibid., p. 136f]. Moltmann advocates a renewal of this tradition.

### 2. What we say of Ourselves: We can experience God in all things.

The next reform we need is about ourselves, that we can experience God in creation. Today people seek a new access to nature. If we understand nature as God's creation, then we can say that all things have a divine inner side, a way of revealing the divine. How can we see this divine aspect in all things? How can these become for us an experience of God? Ask not how things appear only to us but how they appear in

relationship to God as their creator. How does God see them?

St. Francis, of course is our great exemplar in this kind of seeing. Francis saw God's presence in creatures to an astonishing degree. For St. Francis, all of creation was what some have called a '*sacramental presence*.' Others would call this, the ability to see nature as a '*parable of God*,' to discover the traces of God in all things.

In the scriptures, created things '*proclaim*' to other created things their common creator. '*The heavens praise thy wonders, O Lord*' (Ps. 89:5). All the natural elements and all living things '*praise the Lord*' (Ps. 148). '*The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork*.' (Ps. 19:1, Job 26). [*ibid*, 137f]

In other words, God awaits us in all things. It is not only in the direct experience of ourselves that we perceive God. Every objective and social experience can also become an avenue to discover God present. Christian mysticism has always emphasized such an ecological '*aesthetics of nature*.' All the senses can be tuned to perceive the presence of God in touch, feeling and taste as well as hearing. [*ibid.*, pp. 137f.]

### 3. What we say of Christ: Seeing the Universal Christ

Today we urgently need a rediscovery of the universal dimension of Christ. In the ancient world the image of Christ as universal was his victory overcoming the feared powers of gods and demons. For people of those times the "cosmic" Christ brought the freedom of faith. Today the conflict we see with increasing clarity is Christ and the cosmic catastrophe itself, our multiplying ecological crises.

As noted before, the theology of modern times reduced the relevance of Christ to the salvation of human beings, of human souls. All else was implicitly left outside this boundary. But if Jesus is the Christ of God, we must return to also thinking of him as the all-reconciling reality. We see this image of the risen Christ in Paul (1 Cor. 8:6) and after him, in the Epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians. Faith in the cosmic Christ discovers the reconciliation of all things in heaven and on earth. Everything created is accepted as that for which Christ gave himself, even to death on the cross and which he leads toward resurrection. The war of human beings with creation must be replaced by the reconciliation of human beings with nature, and nature with human beings.

We can now see that the Church's restriction to the human world and the salvation of souls was a perilous abbreviation. The Church has to represent the whole cosmos, so it must bring before God the '*groaning of creation*' as well as the hope for the coming of God to everything created. Hopefully, with this revised and renewed vision of the cosmic Christ, believers will again draw reverence for all created being into their worship of God. [*ibid.*, pp. 138f.]

These three areas of reform all point to the need for a new perspective of God and human beings in the world. Behind our human centered blinders is a view of creation that has gone wrong, and a theology that has been surrendered. The reversal we must see will once again see human beings and their world as embedded in the conditions for life on earth and the evolution of all the living. Human existence is dependent on nature. And finally, creation and the whole universe is our God intended home. [*ibid.*, pp. 139f]

Watch, “*The Universal Christ by Richard Rohr*,” [YouTube](#), April 29,

2019; 3 min., 19 sec. In this brief video, Richard Rohr sees the Christ everywhere and not just in people. He reminds us that the first incarnation of God is in Creation itself, and he tells us that “*God loves things by becoming them.*”

Pause for 5-8 minutes to consider these questions:

Can you recall an experience or discovery of God awaiting you within yourself, within others, within creatures of nature, in the natural world?

Have you ever viewed photographs, paintings, or scenes from a film that moved you to see God in all things?

## D. Christian Action for Creation Care

A *reformed theology* gives us fresh eyes and open hearts to discover God the creator in all creation, to discover Christ, the deep incarnation of God’s Word reconciling all things. It will bring a fresh understanding of our human reality, “*at home in the cosmos.*” A *reformed spirituality* brings us to new wonder, love and gratitude for the gift of creation.

The new vision also gives a powerful motive to *act* .... to get involved in the struggle to return the natural world to God’s own vision of creation rather than continuing to subject it to an increasingly destructive and utilitarian subservience to the human ego.

Christian vocation then becomes much larger than our old focus of human self-improvement and various tribal or social contracts within the human order. Now the great commandment to love God and our neighbor as ourselves begins to include God as manifest in the natural world, this sacred Earth, our island home. Our neighbor begins to include all the creatures of the world and very directly for each of us the generations yet unborn, our children and grandchildren and more who will inherit the land we leave behind.

At the end of his book, *At Home in the Cosmos*, [Maryknoll, 2001, p. 240] David Toolan raises the moral question of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, “*Why behave this way rather than that?*” The astonishing answer is:

“So that the earth can continue, so the air will remain breathable, so the seas will abound in fish and the rain-forests flourish with millions of species as yet unnamed, so that the land will continue to be fertile, so time will continue to flow and life will keep on propagating. ... These things are now our tasks, our moral duties. ... This is the new social contract with the natural world, which will continue to thrive only with our active co-operation and support. -- I dare say, even God may await our decisions, not knowing what we will do – and hoping that this time creation will work.”

**Closing this session consider these questions and/or any others before:**

A prophet of our time, Thomas Berry says, *“The Great Work in our time is to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner.... This work before us...is not a role that we have chosen. It is a role given to us, beyond any consultation with ourselves. We were chosen by some power beyond ourselves for this historical task.”* [The Great Work, Bell Tower, 1999, p. 3, 7]

Do you agree with this? Do you believe God has bestowed on us the ability to fulfill this role?