

Sacred Earth: Exploring Environmental Responsibility in Christian Thought



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Abstract

Christianity offers a profound and often misunderstood perspective on the environment and nature, emphasizing stewardship, moral responsibility, and reverence for creation. Contrary to the common misconception that Christian theology promotes exploitation of the natural world, biblical texts portray humans as caretakers rather than conquerors. Genesis 1–2 emphasizes tending to and caring for creation, while Romans 1:20 and other passages highlight nature as a revelation of divine wisdom. The teachings of figures such as Saint Francis of Assisi further exemplify ethical engagement with all living beings. Integrating modern scientific insights from ecology, conservation biology, and climate science, the Christian ethic of care aligns with sustainable practices and recognizes the interdependence of human and ecological well-being. By bridging scripture and science, Christianity provides a morally grounded framework for addressing contemporary environmental challenges, encouraging both spiritual reflection and practical action to preserve biodiversity, ecosystems, and the planet for current and future generations.

Introduction

The relationship between Christianity and the natural world is complex, historically rich, and often misunderstood. Popular narratives have sometimes framed Christian theology as promoting human dominion over nature, suggesting that environmental exploitation is sanctioned by scripture. However, a closer reading of biblical texts reveals a far more nuanced and ecologically sensitive worldview. From the opening chapters of Genesis, where humans are placed in the garden of Eden to “tend and take care of it” (Genesis 2:15), to Pauline reflections in Romans 1:20, the natural world is portrayed as both sacred and instructive, offering insights into the divine order. This understanding is complemented by the ethical and spiritual example of figures such as Saint Francis of Assisi, who recognized the interconnectedness and the intrinsic value of all creatures.

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Modern science reinforces these insights, highlighting the interdependence of ecosystems, the consequences of biodiversity loss, and the importance of sustainable resource management. By integrating theological reflection with ecological science, Christianity offers a framework for environmental stewardship that is both spiritually meaningful and practically necessary. This article explores how Christian teachings, when understood in their full ethical and historical context, can inform responsible interaction with the natural world and challenge misconceptions about faith and environmental care.

Creation as Sacred

From the outset, the Judeo-Christian worldview situates humanity within the broader framework of creation. Genesis 1:1–31 recounts the divine act of creation, culminating in humans being made in the “image of God” (Genesis 1:27). While this has sometimes been interpreted as granting humans absolute authority over the earth, the text also emphasizes stewardship: God entrusts humans with the responsibility to “tend and take care of” the garden (Genesis 2:15). This language implies guardianship rather than domination, suggesting that human flourishing is interlinked with ecological well-being. Modern ecological studies reinforce this idea, demonstrating that sustainable human societies thrive when natural systems are preserved, echoing the biblical ethic of care.

Nature as a Revelation of God

In Christian thought, the natural world is considered a “book of God,” revealing divine wisdom through its order, beauty, and complexity. Romans 1:20 asserts that God’s “eternal power and divine nature” are perceived in creation, implying that observing ecosystems and species can lead to spiritual insight. This perspective aligns with contemporary scientific appreciation of biodiversity: the intricate interdependence of species, ecosystems, and biochemical cycles mirrors the harmony celebrated in Scripture. Ecological research further validates this interconnectedness, showing that even small disruptions, like the loss of pollinators or deforestation, have cascading effects, underscoring the moral and spiritual significance of environmental stewardship.

Ethical Stewardship and Responsibility

Christianity emphasizes moral responsibility toward creation. The concept of stewardship is not limited to humans’ interaction with fellow humans but extends to the non-human world. Saint Francis of Assisi (1181–1226) famously expressed this ethos, viewing all creatures as part of a divine family. His *Canticle of the Sun* celebrates elements like “Brother Sun” and “Sister Moon,” reflecting a spiritual appreciation for natural cycles. This ethical framework aligns with modern environmental ethics, including sustainability principles and conservation biology. Scientific studies, such as those on climate change and species extinction, underscore that neglecting our ecological duties has tangible consequences for both humanity and the biosphere.

Misconceptions and Modern Challenges

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A common misconception is that Christian theology inherently encourages the exploitation of nature. Critics often cite Genesis 1:28, interpreting the command to “subdue” the earth as a license for unchecked resource use. Yet, contextual analysis reveals that “subdue” (Hebrew: *kabash*) implies responsible management, not wanton destruction. The New Testament reinforces this ethic, with teachings emphasizing humility, love, and respect for all creation (Matthew 25:31–46), suggesting that ethical treatment of nature is inseparable from moral life.

Modern scientific perspectives, including climate science, ecology, and conservation biology, highlight that human actions can profoundly alter ecosystems. Integrating these findings with Christian ethics suggests a theology of care: humans are stewards, not conquerors, and ethical living requires sustainable practices. Christianity, therefore, offers both spiritual motivation and moral obligation for ecological responsibility.

Science and Faith in Dialogue

Christianity’s engagement with science enhances its environmental ethic rather than diminishes it. Scientific insights into planetary boundaries, biodiversity loss, and ecosystem dynamics complement the scriptural call to stewardship. For example, the recognition of Earth’s finite resources mirrors biblical warnings against greed and short-sighted exploitation (Proverbs 12:10; Luke 12:15). By framing ecological action as both a moral and spiritual duty, Christianity provides a framework for addressing contemporary environmental crises.

Conclusion

Christianity’s engagement with the natural world offers a vision of stewardship, reverence, and ethical responsibility that is both spiritually profound and practically relevant. Far from endorsing exploitation, biblical texts and Christian teachings emphasize care, guardianship, and the recognition of creation as a revelation of divine wisdom. From Genesis’ injunction to “tend and take care of” the earth (Genesis 2:15) to Saint Francis of Assisi’s celebration of all creatures, the faith consistently underscores the interconnectedness of life and the moral duty to protect it. Modern ecological science, including studies on biodiversity, climate change, and ecosystem interdependence, reinforces these principles, demonstrating that sustainable human flourishing is inseparable from the health of the natural world.

By integrating scriptural insights with scientific understanding, Christianity provides both moral motivation and practical guidance for environmental action. Misconceptions about dominion over nature can be replaced with a theology of care that honours the sacredness of creation while addressing contemporary ecological challenges. Ultimately, the Christian ethic encourages humans to act as responsible stewards, fostering harmony between spiritual values and environmental sustainability, and ensuring that the gifts of creation are preserved for present and future generations.

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