

Robert Barry Leal, *THROUGH ECOLOGICAL EYES*

Discussion Questions and Activities

Chapter 1: Christians in the Environment

Discussion questions:

1. Is it true that there is in (some) Christians “a troubling suspicion about all things related to the earth” (p.9)? If there is some truth in this claim, what can be done about the situation?
2. Discuss the environmental implications of Psalm 24.1: “The earth and its fullness are the Lord’s”. (pp.9,14)
3. What is Gnosticism? Do you detect elements of it in contemporary Christianity? (p.10)
4. Can we be joyful about creation if we see ourselves as “pilgrims in this barren land” (p.12)?
5. What do you see as the “culmination of creation” in the Genesis creation stories? (p.13)
6. Do you agree that, with regard to the environment, what we need is not just “technological ‘fixes’” but “spiritual change” (p.15)? How can this be achieved?
7. Do you see creation as a hierarchy? Or as a web of life? Or as both? (pp.16-17)
8. What is anthropocentrism? What encouragement does Christian teaching give to it? (pp.18-19)
9. Have we been guilty of neglecting two sides of the triangle on page 22? i.e. the relations between God and nature, and between humankind and nature. Where does the Holy Spirit fit into this schema?
10. “Without [environmental] rights, all other rights ultimately are lost.” (p.28) Do you agree?

Activities:

1. “Spiritual truth is most frequently communicated through our earthly environment.” (p.12) Find some examples.
2. Locate in the Bible some echoes of the “web of life” view of creation. (pp.20-22) List some practical ways in which the “web of life” view should influence our attitude to the environment.
3. Do we need to choose between ecological responsibility and social justice? Find some examples in recent history of the link between the two. (pp.24-26)

Chapter 2: The Theological Importance of Water

Discussion questions:

1. Is water for most people simply a commodity to be traded rather than God's gift to be respected? How does our everyday language reflect such an attitude? (pp.31-32)
2. What are your favourite forms of water? Why? (pp.32-33)
3. Does the importance of water for the body give it religious significance? (p.33)
4. Reflect on the relative paucity of fresh water on Earth. (p.34)
5. Consider the importance of water as an agent of healing. (p.39)
6. How important is water in the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion? (p.43)
7. Do you agree that often "we tend to separate the intellectual or spiritual truth that is communicated by water from the physical reality of water"? (p.44)
8. List some of the associations made in the Bible between water and the Spirit. (pp.48-49)
9. How can we reconcile the religious impulse to thank God for gifts in nature with the prevailing scientific view that we are simply witnessing the operation of natural laws? (p.49)
10. Does our society regard creation as "an alien spiritless world governed by impersonal scientific laws? (p.50)
11. How does the Gospel of John show the links between water and salvation? (p.51)
12. Discuss the cover of *Through Ecological Eyes* in light of the explanation on p.53.

Activities:

1. Find some examples in the Bible of water as an agent of purification and cleansing and as an agent of service. (pp.40-41)
2. Do you think "the time has come to cease distinguishing between 'holy' and other water"? (p.45) List ways in which this would translate into practice.
3. Look up *The Canticle of the Sun* by Francis of Assisi, Hymn 100 in *Together in Song*, and Psalm 148. What aspects of nature are addressed? What do you make of the passages in the Bible where water is depicted as intensely alive? (p.35)
4. List the ways in which "mere water" can show "the profound in the everyday" (p.54) List practical ways in which we can show our respect for water as God's gift.

Chapter 3: Air, Earth and Fire

Discussion questions:

1. What makes us aware of pollution in the air? (p.56)
2. Why do you think the Jews made such a close association between “wind” and “spirit”? (pp.57-58)
3. What theological and practical consequences flow from the perception that air is “the breath of God”? (pp.58-60,61)
4. What is the importance of wind and air in the Bible on the Day of Pentecost? (p.60)
5. How significant is it that we use “earth”, “dirt” and “soil” in a pejorative sense? (p.62)
6. What is the attitude of indigenous peoples to earth? (p.62)
7. What role does earth play in the *Genesis* creation stories? (pp.63-64)
8. How do you think earth came to be regarded in our culture as an unspiritual realm? (p.64)
9. What can we do to interrupt the cycle of soil degradation in our society? (p.67)
10. In what ways has fire been important in the development of civilisation? (p.69)
11. What is the importance of fire in the Gospels and in Christian liturgy? (p.70)
12. Why does the dove have a red body and red wings in the logo of the Uniting Church in Australia? (p.72)
13. In what ways may fire be associated with purification and regeneration? (pp.73-74)

Activities:

1. List some practical ways of respecting the air as “the breath of God”.
2. List the ways in which we are nowadays degrading “God’s good earth”. (pp.65-66)
3. Locate some incidents in the Old Testament in which fire is related to God’s presence. (pp.70-72)

Chapter 4: Animals and Birds in Creation

Discussion questions:

1. What evidence is there that we have “a deeply ambivalent attitude” towards animals? (p.76)
2. What examples can you find in popular speech of our lack of respect for animals? (p.77)
3. Are you aware in your district of instances of cruelty to animals?
4. Do animals have souls? Or do you incline to a cartesian view of animals? (p.78)
5. Do animals have value in themselves? Or are they simply for the use of humans? (pp.78-79)
6. What are the ramifications of the discovery that our DNA is remarkably similar to that of many animals? (p.79)
7. What biblical justification is sometimes given for the abuse of animals? (p.80)
8. What do the *Genesis* creation stories and the story of the Flood tell us about the relationship between humans and animals? (pp.82-84)
9. How does the biblical practice of sacrifice relate to respect for animals? (p.85)
10. What evidence can you find of our ambivalent attitude to birds? (pp.88-89)
11. How does Jesus speak of birds? (p.90)
12. Of what significance is the dove in the Bible? (pp.91-92)

Activities:

1. Locate places in your district where the habitat of native animals and birds has been destroyed.
2. Look up the stories of Saint Jerome and his lion; Androcles and the lion; Daniel in the lion’s den; Francis and the wolf of Gubbio.
3. Make a list of animals and birds that are used to portray biblical figures. (pp.85-87)
4. What practical differences to our treatment of animals and birds should flow from respect for animals in the Bible?

Chapter 5: Vegetation in the Bible

Discussion questions:

1. How important are trees in the natural order? (pp.95-96)
2. Why do trees affect us so profoundly? (p.97)
3. Consider the notion of a “tree of life” in the Bible. (pp.98-99)
4. What is the significance of calling Christ’s cross “a tree”? (pp.100-101)
5. Have we a duty to cultivate native plants in our gardens?
6. To what extent does “the story of the Garden of Eden [carry] a strong ecological message into the twenty-first century”? (p.105)
7. What is the significance of gardens in the New Testament? (pp.107-108)
8. How do you define “wilderness”? (p.111)
9. What was the Israelites’ experience of wilderness? (p.113)
10. In the Bible what important things happened in the wilderness? (pp.113-116)
11. What would you say to people who see it as humankind’s destiny to transform wilderness into garden?
12. How important was wilderness for Moses and his followers? (pp.117-118)
13. Why is John the Baptist so identified with the wilderness? (pp.120-122)
14. Have you had a “wilderness experience”? Share it with others.

Activities:

1. List your favourite trees. What attracts you to them?
2. List the notable gardens mentioned in the Bible. (pp.104-109)
3. Find out what wilderness areas remain in Australia. Should they be preserved? Why?
4. List all the biblical characters for whom wilderness was significant.

Chapter 6: Ecology in the Hebrew Bible

Discussion questions:

1. Why does the story of Noah appeal to our imagination? (p.123)
2. What is the significance of the inclusion of animals in the Noah story?
3. Is there a parallel to be drawn between Noah's Great Flood and the effects on the oceans of current global warming?
4. What are the implications of the inclusion of "every living creature" in God's covenant of *Genesis 9*? (p.128)
5. To what extent is the anthropocentric formula "man the measure of all things" at the centre of the environmental crisis? (p.129)
6. "*Job* is one of those biblical books that we often refer to but rarely read". (p.130) Why is this so?
7. Is there a lesson in humility to be learned from the story of *Job*? (pp.131-132)
8. What does *Job* teach us about respect for the wilderness and its creatures? (pp.133-136)
9. Do you think that the association of the Sabbath with creation has become obscured by our celebration of the Lord's Day on Sunday? (p.138)
10. Have we lost the sense of "God's unalloyed joy in the contemplation of the creation"? (p.139)
11. Consider the notions of "sabbath", "sabbatical year", and "jubilee year". (p.141) Have they any relevance today? (pp.141-142)
12. In *Isaiah 11* how is the image of a tree used to depict the punishment and rebirth of a nation? (p.144)
13. How does *Isaiah's* vision relate to social justice and the prevailing order? (pp.145-146)

Activities:

1. Trace the story of Noah from *Genesis 5:28* to *9:29*.
2. Examine carefully God's covenant as recorded in *Genesis 9*.
3. Read *Job 38-41* and marvel at its poetry and knowledge of wildlife. (p.133)
4. Listen to Haydn's oratorio *The Creation* and enjoy!

Chapter 7: Jesus Christ and Creation

Discussion questions:

1. In comparing humans with other living beings, are you more inclined to stress differences or similarities? (pp.150-151)
2. How do you react to Neil Darragh's statement: "God became an item in the carbon and nitrogen cycles"? (p.154)
3. Does belief in the Incarnation give "enhanced importance to the ecosystem"? (p.154)
4. How important is Christology for a Christian understanding of the natural world? (p.156)
5. In what sort of environment did Jesus grow up? What evidence is there in the Gospels that Jesus related closely to his environment? (p.157)
6. Does the preoccupation with seeking lessons in nature sometimes prevent us from seeing nature in its beautiful reality? (p.159)
7. How many of Jesus' parables involve seeds? How many relate to farming? (pp.160-161)
8. What is meant by the "cosmic Christ" of Colossians 1? (p.155) What are its ecological implications?
9. Do you agree that "in Western Christianity we seem to have lost this 'whole creation' emphasis of the Christ figure"? (p.164)
10. How widely is the cosmic Christ of Colossians reflected in other parts of the New Testament? (pp.164-165)
11. What does it mean to be reconciled to the environment? (p.166)
12. In Western Christianity have we lost sight of the link between creation and redemption? (pp.166-167)

Activities:

1. Make a list of the ecological implications that you see as flowing from belief in the Incarnation. (p.154)
2. Study Colossians 1 and note its emphasis on "all things".
3. Find out all you can about Galilee – the environment in which Jesus grew up. (pp.157-167)
4. Find examples of Christ Pantocrator, frequently depicted in Orthodox churches. (p.167)

Chapter 8: Jesus and His Parables

Discussion questions:

1. Reflect on the implications of the statement from the parable of the Prodigal Son: “when he came to himself”. (p.169)
2. What did the prodigal son mean when he said: “I have sinned against heaven”? (p.169)
3. Does the parable of the Prodigal Son suggest that human wastefulness and environmental troubles go together? (p.171) Do you find this suggestion elsewhere in the Bible?
4. Is “pigsty” an appropriate description of the state of our environment?
5. Does affluence necessarily lead to prodigality and wastefulness?
6. What prompted Jesus to tell the parable of the Good Samaritan? (pp.174-175)
7. Is it significant that, in contrast to the other characters, the victim in the parable of the Good Samaritan remains quite anonymous? (p.175)
8. In the parable of the Good Samaritan how does Jesus encourage us to broaden the concept of “neighbour”? (pp.176-177)
9. How helpful is it to envisage the environment as the “new poor”? (p.178)
10. Has the Church been acting like the priest and the Levite in regard to the environment? (p.178)