

# Christianity and nature

*A conversation between Patrick Curry and Nigel Cooper, conducted by email between June and December 2018.*

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Dear Nigel — Thank you very much for agreeing to discuss with me Christian, and particularly Anglican, attitudes to the natural world. I would like to start with what I take to be a major part of those attitudes, namely what is often called ‘stewardship’, which entails valuing and caring for the natural world as God’s creation. This is distinct from ‘dominion’, as expressed in Genesis 1:26 and 28, which has sometimes been interpreted as *domination* and therefore a license for exploitation.

Assuming this description is correct, then it seems to me that stewardship has great positive potential to encourage respectful and responsible behaviour on the part of humans towards the rest of nature. However, there is also a potential drawback. From an ecocentric perspective, since the value of the creation results from it having been (and/or being) created by God, ultimate value lies not with the natural world as such but with God. Another way to put it might be that in a theistic approach, the Earth belongs to God, whereas ecocentrically speaking, it belongs (in a manner of speaking) strictly and only to itself.

In which case, since God is usually understood as a transcendent deity – to a significant extent, at least – and therefore as not identical with nature, then Christians’ decisions affecting it will ultimately be determined not by whether and how we value and understand nature but rather by how we value and understand God.

Could you comment on this please?

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Dear Patrick — You are right that a major approach amongst Christian environmentalists does revolve around the stewardship concept. For instance, in 2005 the Church of England’s General Synod warmly received the report *Sharing God’s Planet* (available at <https://is.gd/Y9Wlqm>).

I think your question of ownership opens up the conceptual issue of – ‘in a manner of speaking’ – can one own oneself, and can one also value oneself? This in turn is related to the question of whether one can cause the existence of oneself. This reduces to the school child’s question, “Who made God?”. The typical theological reply to this is that existence for God is constitutive to the concept. That is, by the word ‘God’ we usually refer to a potential something whose existence is radically different to our own being, in that, if such a God exists, that God exists necessarily and also brings the creation into existence with a derivative, contingent type of being. Obviously contested, but very interesting, questions.

Perhaps at this point I should make a disclaimer. I am not myself a fan of the stewardship approach to building a theological argument for a vastly more positive relationship between humans and the rest of nature. Back in 1996, in the paper ‘Wildlife conservation in churchyards: A case-study in ethical judgements’ (<https://is.gd/efddXg>), in a section in which I criticized the language of ‘management’ in nature conservation, I briefly criticized the concept of stewardship (Palmer, 1992):

Stewards, like managers, work to values determined elsewhere which they then accept: stewards are part of a hierarchy of control, where the non-human is directly dominated but the stewards themselves are

## Nigel Cooper and Patrick Curry

### About the authors

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only accountable in the distant future; stewardship assumes a metaphysical division of humans from the rest of nature.

(The Palmer reference is to: Palmer C (1992) Stewardship: A case study in environmental ethics. In: Ball I, Goodall M, Palmer C and Reader J, eds. *The Earth Beneath: A critique of green theology*. SPCK, London, UK: 67–86.)

I would also add that its scriptural basis is weak. It interprets the dominion command in Genesis by using the steward language from the synoptic gospels: Genesis refers to the human role in the creation, whereas the synoptic Jesus is referring to how leaders in the church should behave. This last is problematic in itself if one believes in a collaborative and shared model of leadership.

Overall, it seems to me that stewardship is an advance on an exploitative understanding of dominion, and, therefore, to be cautiously welcomed in a world of *realpolitik* – so long as we also provide a critique of its hidden assumptions and call for something better.

Now, let me return to the doctrine of God. So often practical and ethical issues have a reciprocal relationship with our understandings of God (theology, *sensu stricto*). Ethical issues challenge our theologies, while our theologies will shape our ethics, either progressively or regressively. Perhaps the first thing to say is that for me, ‘transcendence’ is about the utter *otherness* of God – including that the Being of God is utterly unlike our own type of being – rather than about God’s distance or separateness. I tend to conceptualize this, though very inadequately, by way of the picture of a shift from two to three dimensions: the known world occupies, as it were, the two dimensions of a plane, but it is shot through/across with God as a third dimension, “in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

This passage from Acts is popular with expositors of panentheism – not a pantheism, which, forgive me, seems close to what I imagine your position is, which elides God and nature. You might wish to drop the elision and ignore God, perhaps, but that still, I suspect, leaves nature in effectively

the role of God. For panentheists everything exists within God, but the created world is not coterminous with God; rather, it is a creature within the being of God. (I might refer readers to: Clayton P and Peacocke A, eds (2004) *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic reflections on God’s presence in a scientific world*. William B Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, USA.)

I don’t think I am a panentheist. Its proponents’ image of God seems insufficiently transcendent for my liking. However, the embeddedness of nature within God is something I agree with. And it was for this reason that I made my first remark, that right understandings of God and nature are, in some way, reciprocal.

Similarly, at the level of detail, almost by definition what God wants for us as individuals is what is best for us, and the spiritual task is to align our wills with God’s will; compare the famous phrase in the ‘Collect for Peace’ in the *Book of Common Prayer*, “whose service is perfect freedom.” This is not straightforward. How do we tell when our wills are aligned with God and when not? And if not, why then is our will in some way defective (a particularly pertinent question in a culture that exalts ‘choice’ and relies on an economic theory grounded in preference-satisfaction)? At one extreme we can recognize that we can become addicted to various harmful things and then our wills are not to be trusted. At the other, for instance when we are ill and wish to be better, why might an acceptance of our fate (“God’s will”) be ethically just?

Similarly, when our addictions, *e.g.* to ‘stuff’, are harming nature, it is easy to see that our wills are not well aligned. It is harder to discern where the divine will, nature’s ‘will’ and our own wills should align when we contemplate how we should feed the world’s billions of humans. It is harder still when we navigate all the little decisions of our day-to-day life. So does my theology offer any assistance? I would like to think so, but how is for another time.

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Dear Nigel — I am theologically out of my depth here, but I appreciate more now the

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resources a Christian has available for a positive (caring *etc.*) relationship with the rest of nature. (Whether one avails oneself of them, and how common it is to do so in the manner you have described, is, of course, another question.)

However, let me try to return to my original question from a different angle, using William James (himself borrowing from Gustav Fechner) for this purpose. Writing in crude but vigorous terms, he says that the problem:

is our inveterate habit of regarding the spiritual not as the rule but as an exception in the midst of nature [...] [I]f we believe in a Divine Spirit, we fancy him on the one side as bodiless, and nature as soulless on the other. What comfort, or peace, Fechner asks, can come from such a doctrine? The flowers wither at its breath, the stars turn into stone; our own body grows unworthy of our spirit and sinks into a tenement for carnal senses only. The book of nature turns into a volume on mechanics, in which whatever has life is treated as a sort of anomaly; a great chasm of separation yawns between us and all that is higher than ourselves; and God becomes a thin nest of abstractions.

(This passage is from: James W (1977) *A Pluralistic Universe*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, USA: 70–1.)

Now I imagine you will say that James's understanding of theism is wrong-headed – in Christian terms, because of *kenosis*, the incarnation and its implications. To which I might reply: that's all very well, but misunderstandings have just as real and serious consequences as correct ones. And is this not a very common misunderstanding? If so (and I rather hope you will admit it is so), then what work can Christians do to correct it?

I can refine that question somewhat by adding that you reject stewardship – or at least, accept it only in the course of calling for 'something better' – and also one of the leading alternatives, panentheism, as well as pantheism. (By the way, I had always taken 'panentheism' to refer to the presence of God in nature, not the other way around. Is that entirely mistaken?)

Could I therefore ask you to sketch out a slightly fuller and more coherent Christian alternative, in general terms, on the basis of 'the embeddedness of nature within God'?

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Dear Patrick — Firstly, a bit on panentheism. You are quite right in saying that this generally refers to the presence of God in nature. But because God 'extends' (forgive the scare quotes) beyond the nature that God fills, nature also is 'in' God. Both have scriptural warrant – thus the famous passage from Acts I quoted above on nature within God, and "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" says the Lord?" (Jeremiah 23:24) for the alternate. This is classically the immanence of God to balance God's transcendence.

Secondly, a response to James. His robust critique works for those who have embraced Cartesianism, but I feel it misses the mark when it comes to more traditional theology. It is more than *kenosis*, though I shall return to that. The starting point is that the presence of the spiritual *is the rule* in nature. There is no part of creation that is not shot through with the presence of God – God as Spirit. There are instances where the presence of God is easier to discern – a holy human life, the sacraments, our experience of love and forgiveness. There are also other instances where it is much harder to discern the presence – wartime, illness, boring routines – where God might be said to be hidden, but which the life of Christ teaches us are actually the places where God is most intensely present. I think many people fairly readily experience something some would call 'God' or 'spirit,' or for which someone like you might prefer the term 'enchantment', as part of their attentiveness to much of the non-human world of nature, with all its beauty, diversity and astonishing complexity.

But to claim this may not fully avoid James's critique. God may be present, but present as an alien observer or as a malign puppeteer. The resurrection is the pointer to the profound beneficence of God, but what is the relationship between God and God's creatures? This is where *kenosis* can enter our discussion. The Two Natures (of God and of man) in Christ is at once the unique

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incarnation and the pattern of *all* creation – hence the traditional saying that the Father creates through the Son in the Holy Spirit. Whereas the Two Wills in Christ were united in purpose (*kenosis*/emptying of the will in humility to the other), the lesser wills throughout creation are to varying degrees resistant to the loving will of God and so are in a continual dialogue with that will. The divine will does not compel, but is patient and sustaining, winning over the other by its own *kenosis*.

I acknowledge that this is a bit hand-waving! One might claim it's a paradox, but I am never keen to claim this. Rather, it seems to me understandable if one considers points-of-view. From the divine perspective, the victory of love is secure; from the creature's perspective free-will remains, as does the perpetual call to our own *kenosis* to the divine will. Thus the flowers do not wither because of a Cartesian dualism, but they flower to proclaim their own glory, which is also the glory of God who fills them. And they die to proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

This last sentence reminds us what it is to lord-it in Christian theology. We can now turn to the first chapter of Genesis, which can cause so much trouble. Certainly the delegation of dominion to humankind has been used as a mandate to pillage the Earth, but that surely is not the intention of the passage – a passage that emphasizes that all creatures are to multiply and fill the Earth and that all of creation is very good. The dominion clause is closely linked with the statement that male and female are made in God's image, presaging the incarnation. There the 'second Adam' fulfils the mandate that the first Adam was unable to fulfil: to tend and honour the Earth (a better translation of Genesis 2:15 than in most English bibles). The second Adam exercises dominion through the self-giving sacrifice of the cross. Those who share in Christ's death at their baptism are, therefore, called upon to exercise dominion over creation in a similar sacrificial way.

This is a rich resource for articulating our relationship with the rest of creation, but poses the question as to why those who espouse the Christian faith make such poor use of this resource. In criticizing my co-

religionists I certainly include myself in the criticism. I also, though, do not believe that Christians are proportionately worse than other sections of our society. There are certainly some sectors of the Church, particularly overseas, that are closely allied to right-wing politics and environmental degradation. Conversely, it seems to me that I have found at least a proper proportion of Christians in the environmental groups I have been associated with, despite sometimes feeling unwelcome because of the targeting of Christianity by some environmentalists. Nevertheless, that still leaves the question as to why we do not do better. Of course, the answer, such as it is, applies to all the sinning of Christians: the now and the not-yet, or become-what-you-are. We are in the process of transformation or sanctification.

This brings me to my final point. I believe this sketch of a Christian theology of creation provides an Earth-friendly framework for theory and action. I also believe that Christianity provides a capacity for the scale of changes in our behaviour that is now needed, *if* we seriously draw upon it. Among the several obstacles to change, two stand out for me – self-centredness and a lack of hope. The work of prayer, similar to Buddhist meditation, is the reconstruction work of our wills, gradually shifting our focus away from ourselves. As for hope, Christian theology places similar weight on the end of the world as on its beginning, natively termed 'eschatology' (after the Greek for *last*).

St Paul in Romans 8 (and 11) has a profound way of picturing this. Looking out onto all the distress among humans and the natural world, he suggests that this bondage to corruption was a strategic choice of God on the way to a glorious liberty. All are healed/saved in hope. To my mind this makes every little contribution we make worthwhile – as these are of eternal worth, and thus outweigh by far all our sins, which will pass away. The last book of the Bible, Revelation, is full of judgement and destruction of sin and its causes (including a special mention of the destroyers of the Earth in 11:18) but as justice is the righting of wrongs, so the book actually ends with God proclaiming, "Behold, I make all things new." ■

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