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Anglican Women's Studies Centre

Sharing an Ecological Theology Perspective

By Revd Jenny Chalmers



Jenny Chalmers was invited to speak on the topic of a Christian view of conservation in the Wellington Mosque at the beginning of Islam Awareness week. This talk draws heavily on Sally McFague's book The Body of God: An Ecological Theology (1993) Augsburg Fortress.

Salam aleikum, Tena koutou katoa,

Firstly thank you for the honour of inviting me to be here and for the further great honour of inviting me to speak. I am truly humbled to be here speaking with you at the beginning of Islam Awareness week 2012, and truly honoured and amazed to be speaking in the mosque. Thank you for your kind invitation.

The Christian view of the environment is a difficult topic. Our New Testament does not deal with how one thinks of the environment, rather it deals with our responsibilities to the other, particularly people in need, our neighbours and so on. But the Hebrew Bible which makes up the First Testament of belief, and in particular the book of Genesis speaks of people's dominion or stewardship of creation, our world, God's world, peace be upon him, our environment.

Let me read to you from Genesis 1:26-31, the text that informs Christians of our rights and responsibilities for the environment.

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.' God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.' And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

This is a text from the Hebrew Bible, the text we share with our elders, the Jews however, we interpret the text through our particular Christian framework. We Christians understand from this text that all stand before God, peace be upon him, in the same way. All creatures, all plants everything is the creation of the creator.

Now in this creation we understand that humans are superior and are designed by the creator to order, to rule and to care for the other creatures. Humans are superior and with that human superiority comes responsibility; responsibility to order creation, to rule over it and to care for it.

We humans have managed to create order of the chaos of our environment, we grow vegetables, we breed animals for food, we mine minerals for energy and adornment, but I am not sure we do so well in caring for it.

The point that I have made about creation, our world, being God's world, peace be upon him, is important, because I want today to speak and expand on the work of a Christian feminist theologian, Sally McFague.

Now what I am going to talk about is a Christian heresy, and it may well be a Muslim heresy and a Jewish heresy. If this heresy offends you, I apologise in advance, but I equally hope it will give you something to think about, particularly when you are thinking of our relationship to, and our rights and responsibilities to the environment.

In the past twenty or thirty years we have moved from the consciousness that we may die from a single finger pushing a single button, that is the threat of one single nuclear explosion extinguishing the earth, to extinction by ourselves. Ecological deterioration is subtle and gradual. It involves the daily, seemingly innocuous activities of every person on the planet.

In this destruction we are dealing with the craftiest of enemies, ourselves. Like addicts, and we are addicted to our high energy lifestyles, we find every available avenue to deny what is profoundly obvious. Life on our planet is diminishing, in both variety and quality and we human beings are to blame.



Photo: Auckland City Council website

family's dinner. The most responsible people are the first world people working in high energy, high profit businesses whose greatest ecological discomfort is having to wait through a hot weekend when the air conditioner is broken down and the repair man is not available until Monday.

Interestingly enough, and alert people will have noticed a bit of this, the population versus the high life style issue divides the developing from developed nations, with each claiming the ecological issue is caused by the others excess. For example, first world documentaries addressing China's huge pollution problem are pretty common. It is rare to see a documentary which addresses our first world life style choices.

As more of the earth becomes desert, water scarcer, air more polluted, food less plentiful, the lines between the have's and have not's will become even more sharply drawn. Justice for the oppressed, an important Christian theme will completely recede from view as when resources become scarce. If we middle class westerners refuse to moderate our lifestyles, we participate in systemic injustice, demanding excessive resources, far beyond what we are entitled to. This is, in Christian thinking, a sin.

I want now to address a Christian theological response to the destruction of our world. Christianity is the religion of incarnation that is our earliest and most persistent doctrines focus on embodiment, on the word becoming flesh.

Every time I celebrate the Eucharist, that is our memory of Christ's last meal, I speak of the bread being the body of Christ and the wine being the blood of Christ.



Photo: Gavin Fisher—NIWA website

Profound life style changes, especially for first world people who use the most energy are highly unpopular. We tend to stick with the easier activities like recycling and growing our own vegetables. And I didn't think twice about getting in my car and driving from the Wairarapa to here this morning using a great deal of fossil fuel. With a bit more planning and better use of my time, I could have caught the train and the bus and still arrived here on time,

The most vulnerable people, in this destruction of our planet, are third world women, whose greatest ecological sin is gathering a few sticks from an already denuded forest to cook her

Actually, the New Testament is pretty impressive for its disparagement of the body and worldly matters to do with the body. For example, despite what my fundamentalist colleagues might say, there is very little written about marriage, in fact the topic of marriage only crops up as a secondary issue when something else is being discussed. The first Christians were far more interested in the next world.

But the body was important to the first Christians, important enough to be concerned with the bodily appearances of Jesus after he was crucified. And important enough to give us a negative view of ourselves.

As I have said Christians think in terms of incarnation, of our wafers and wine becoming the flesh and blood of Jesus. It is only a small step then to extend this thinking into an idea that planet earth is the body of God, peace be upon him.

There are some obvious advantages to thinking in this way.

If we think for example of the world as God's body then we understand an idea of the unity of the world. We can more easily imagine the relationship between each part of the world and the relationship between say the photo copy paper we choose to use and the destruction of forest in Indonesia. This idea of the planet being the body of God helps us think about what we put into our streams, what we put in our rubbish dumps, indeed what rubbish we produce.

The extinction of a butterfly in the Amazon, by the milling of the rainforest becomes more important to us, because we understand that butterfly as part of God's world, in fact as part of God's body. I think you can see the importance of an idea like this to Christian and indeed world thinking.

The point at issue is what does the Christian faith have to say that is special, important, different and illuminating about our environment in relation to God, to our selves and to the natural world?

Other religious traditions may say more and better things than the Christian tradition, but those of us who choose to remain Christian know that we are not called upon to say the whole thing or any one thing. We are just part of a large patchwork quilt addressing this problem.

Our contribution is to think of the world as the body of God. From this comes a mind change, a respect for what is and what might be.

Our particular mind set asks how we care for our neighbours in

third world countries, the poor, the oppressed, when every small movement we make impacts so clearly on their lives. The story of Jesus suggests that the shape of the body includes everyone especially the needy and outcast.

When I say to my congregation on a Sunday, as I did yesterday and every other Sunday, 'We are the body of Christ' I'm not just speaking of the church congregation being the people who believe and carry out those beliefs. I'm reminding them that organically, in every possible way, the world is God's body and we should treat it with the respect and love that such a body demands.

Our Christian contribution then, our right and our responsibility, for rights only come with responsibilities, is to care for the environment, to be as thoughtful as possible about our use of every day things, caring for our world as if it were the body of God.

Or, in the words of our Anglican midday prayer:

*Realising that we are all nourished
from the same source of life,
may we so live that others not be deprived
of air, food, water, shelter or the chance to live.*

Mā te Atua koe e manaaki, Kia ora

Jenny Chalmers is the Vicar of Carterton. Jenny's academic interest is Christian Jewish Muslim relations (She holds a Masters degree from the Woolfe Institute, Cambridge, UK). She is the Christian Co chair of the Wellington Council for Christians, Jews and Muslims, and Wairarapa Chaplain for St John, who recently made her a member of the order of St John, in recognition of her chaplaincy work in the Wairarapa.

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The Centre for Anglican Women's Studies, commonly known as the **Women's Studies Centre** was set up to serve and to advance the interests and needs of the women of this Church particularly those undertaking Theological training.

The Link Representatives from each Diocese and Hui Amorangi have been chosen for their leadership ability to identify, gather, facilitate, resource and encourage women in their educational preparation for ministry whether lay or ordained. It is hoped that the Women's Studies Centre can continue to enjoy the support of each Diocese and Hui Amorangi in this endeavour.



The issue of increasing numbers of women in representative positions across the councils and committees of the Church is seen as a high priority and the practice of intentional mentoring by those already in national and international representative roles is seen as a good way to expose women of this church to fulfill their potential as leaders.

Ensuring that women's voices and stories are heard now and in the future is also one of our continued aims whether it be by traditional methods of publication or using more contemporary technologies like website publication. We remain optimistic that through continued support, the needs of women throughout this Province will be valued and recognized.



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EDITORIAL DISCLAIMER: *The Women's Studies Centre is committed to encouraging and enabling women's voices and perspectives from across the diversity of the Church to be shared more widely. We acknowledge that women's experiences of church differ considerably and that resultant theological perspectives also differ considerably. In general the WSC does not exercise editorial control, rather we welcome as many voices as are willing to contribute.*