



Getting eco-theology right

One of the great delusions of the contemporary political scene is that ecological problems can be solved at the political level of governments and scientific fixes. Christians buy into this delusion as casually as everyone else in our society. Eco-theology, as a result of this delusion, easily becomes political. In the recent decades, Marxist and Neo-Marxist politics easily slipped into so-called Liberation Theology and was lauded (and still is) by so-called 'progressive' left-wing Catholics. Equally, eco-theology can easily slip into the Green politics of the Left. The historical alliance of Australian Catholics with the Labor Party made it easy for Catholics in particular to slip into political platitudes and partisanship and mistake these for theology, and left-wing politics for Christianity.

So if with politics we are in danger of delusion, where do we start with eco-theology? This is the question I want very briefly to answer. A rabbi is reported in the Talmud – the great repository of Jewish oral tradition, which makes so much sense of the Jewish Scriptures – as having said that when God finished creating the world he said to Adam: “Behold my works, how beautiful, how splendid they are. All that I have created, I created for you. Take care, therefore, that you do not destroy my world, for if you do, there will be no-one left to repair what you have destroyed.” (Midrash Kohelet Rabbah, 7: 20)

The Bible has wisdom to offer. It is clear from Genesis 1 that the universe is a creation and belongs to God. And that man's role is one within creation of responsibility, and as the Midrash just quoted suggests, of very great responsibility. The rabbis have drawn attention to the parallels between Genesis 1 and the whole second half of the long book of Exodus. The first half of Exodus is concerned with the Exodus from Egypt. It is an exciting and memorable narrative. Then, in second half of Exodus we read what seems to the English reader a tediously long account of instructions for the construction of the Sanctuary (*mikdash*), “that I may dwell among them” (Ex.25:8). The centre-piece is the Tabernacle (*mishkan*, lit. 'abode'). The narrative continues for fifteen chapters. The narrative is broken in the middle by the story of the Golden Calf (Chs.32-34). As the rabbis remarked, the heavens and earth and all that is in them is created in one chapter, but the Dwelling in fifteen?

Genesis 1 and Exodus 25-40 is a parallel narrative. The Exodus chapters are understood by the rabbis (and would have been understood by Jesus and his disciples too I imagine) as an extension, or continuation in a different (human) mode, of the Creation narrative. The Creation story ends with the Sabbath. The Tabernacle section in chapters 25-31 end with an extended passage on the importance of the Sabbath. The construction chapters, 35-40 begin with the prohibition against work on the Sabbath. This is characteristic of Biblical faith, that sacred *time* takes precedence over sacred place. One word runs through the whole second half of Exodus like a refrain, including the three chapters telling the story of the Golden Calf,

that is the word “make” (*asoh*). Other key words in both Creation and Dwelling narratives are the Hebrew for *see, complete, bless, sanctify, work, behold*.

What all this (and much more which we can't go into here) says is that while God creates the universe, we, like Him, are called upon to create the social universe.¹ This too must be a rule-governed, ordered and integrated diversity (as Leviticus goes on to show). And the corollary is that a tribe or group only becomes a society by building something together. In Exodus the people build a dwelling for God. This is the exemplary society that can build a place that the Most High can dwell. This is Jewish symbolism, but it is Christian too. Jesus taught us to pray, “on earth, as it is in heaven”. The practical side of that prayer is that we Christians are building a body on earth where the Most High is dwelling – a body of people; an ordered and integrated diversity of peace and good will on earth. It takes faith, hope and love.

What has all this to do with eco-theology? It means that Creation is God's and we can't save it *except through the achievement of ordered, peaceful and free society*. A world that is as full of evils as ours will never save the planet or make poverty history. That is the popular political delusion at work, which I mentioned at the outset. Ecological solutions in the biblical teaching will only be achieved through the achievement of society as a commonwealth where diverse peoples and religions work together to build a common good. Then, and only then, will we have a basis to sort out our ecological problems in a proper way. For Catholics, then, *our social teaching is a key to eco-theology*. At least, insofar as it is not also infected by the political delusion referred to above. The core of Catholic social teaching is not political, but restates and elaborates what Jesus taught *as the truth*, that (in the catchy phrase of J. John) the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. This is where the ecological solutions lie, not at the political level. The problems of politics, the problems of the environment are symptoms. If we can't put our hearts right, we won't put the world to rights either. The alternative scenario, if we are not very responsible for each other, is to bring calamity on our heads, like the inhabitants of Easter Island, who for the sake of their gods wrecked their ecology, thus undermining their economy and their food supply and ended up extinct, survived by the giant statues of their stone gods staring out to sea.

Dr Matthew Del Nevo
Dean of Research and Development,
Theology and Christian Spirituality Coordinator
The Broken Bay Institute

¹ See Jonathan Sacks, *The Home We Build Together: Recreating Society*, Continuum, 2006, p.138.