



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Valuing the Goodness of the Earth
(*Caring for Creation*, pp. 11-19)

Suggested Article:

📖 Christian Vision for Creation Care
(*Caring for Creation*, pp. 89-93)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Valuing the Goodness of the Earth

As Chrysostom, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas reflect on the creation story, they value all types of creatures, living and non-living, intrinsically for their unique goodness and instrumentally for the sustenance they provide to others. But they value most highly their complex interrelation in the physical world.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Genesis 1:1-2:4a

Meditation[†]

For God brought things into existence in order to communicate his goodness to creatures and to represent his goodness through them. And since his goodness cannot be adequately represented by any one creature, he produced many diverse creatures.... Hence, the universe as a whole participates in and represents God's goodness in a more perfect way than any single creature does.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

Reflection

If we put God at the center of our thinking about the environment, how would we value the whole earth—both its species and abiota (the non-living factors like air regimes, land masses, and waters) that together form its ecosystems? Jame Schaefer finds three clues in the sermons and writings of some great theologians as they reflected on the creation story in Genesis 1.

▶ *Creatures are valuable intrinsically and instrumentally.* Augustine sees that God created from nothing a universe of “good things, both great and small, celestial and terrestrial, spiritual, and corporeal.” Each one is good in itself and (often) good for the sustenance it provides to others. Even bodies limited by age or disease are good as long as they exist, he says, for existence is good. Rejecting an anthropocentric view, Chrysostom notes all creatures are good, regardless of how they benefit or harm us. To think otherwise is ungrateful to God.

Building on these views, Aquinas depicts each type of creature “as perfect in some way that God implanted in them. Each is endowed by God with an innate way of existing, and, if living, an innate way of acting,” Schaefer writes. They “are also valuable to one another for their sustenance and flourishing; they are altogether essential and therefore valuable to the world's functioning as intended by God.”

▶ *The interrelation of the world's systems, living and nonliving, is a greater good.* Reflecting on Genesis 1:31, Augustine notes the creatures form an interrelating whole that has a “wonderful order and beauty” to bring about “the peace of the universe.” According to Aquinas, “God created living and non-living entities in relation to one another to achieve their common good—the internal sustainability of the world,” Schaefer observes. “God instilled in each creature a natural inclination toward the good of the whole so each is inclined according to its nature—intellectually, sensitively, or naturally—to the common good of all. Their common good is the internal sustainability of the world,...while their ultimate



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good is God.”

► *We should embrace God’s valuation of the world.* For Augustine, “what God sees as wondrously good, humans should also see as wondrously good; they should move beyond their greed and value natural beings intrinsically for themselves and their place in the orderly scheme of creation,” Schaefer reports. We are smart, but limited in our perspective, he reasoned; only God sees the big picture of the physical world. Chrysostom warns us against the “arrogant folly” of doing otherwise, telling us to “shun...like a lunatic” anyone who does not endorse God’s view of the world’s goodness.

Aquinas highlights the restrictions on the “natural dominion” God gives humans over the world, while maintaining God’s “absolute dominion” over everything. Thus, Aquinas believes we should love the world in two ways. “One way is loving other living and inanimate creations as goods that should be conserved for God’s honor and glory,” Schaefer explains; “the natural world has a sacramental quality insofar as the invisible God can be experienced and some aspects of God’s character can be known through the visible, especially God’s goodness, power, and wisdom. Another way of loving Earth with its diverse creatures is by loving them for their usefulness to humans as goods they need in temporal life while aiming for eternal happiness with God.”

Study Questions

1. Why are we tempted to devalue some living and nonliving elements of the created order? What’s wrong with this, according to Chrysostom, Augustine, and Aquinas?
2. Schaefer asks, “If one way of orienting ourselves to God is by valuing Earth intrinsically and instrumentally, how should faith-filled people act toward other species, ecosystems, and the biosphere of Earth?” Do you agree with her answers?
3. Discuss Schaefer’s view that we should recognize “other species, ecosystems, and the biosphere...as having sacramental qualities through which God’s presence can be experienced and some aspects of God’s character that can be discerned.”
4. Which of the three clues to valuing the goodness of the Earth are salient in the hymn “This Is My Father’s World”?

Departing Hymn: “This Is My Father’s World” (vv. 1 and 2)

This is my Father’s world, and to my listening ears
all nature sings, and round me rings the music of the spheres.
This is my Father’s world: I rest me in the thought
of rocks and trees, of skies and seas—his hand the wonders wrought.

This is our Father’s world: O let us not forget
That though the wrong is great and strong, God is the ruler yet.
He trusts us with his world, to keep it clean and fair—
all earth and trees, all skies and seas, all creatures everywhere.

Maltbie D. Babcock (1858-1901), alt.; v. 2 rev. *Mary Babcock Crawford* (1972)

Tune: TERRA BEATA

† Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, Q 47, a 1.

Valuing the Goodness of the Earth

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how John Chrysostom, Augustine of Hippo, and Thomas Aquinas learned to value the goodness of the Earth through their study of the creation story in Genesis 1.
2. To understand the theocentric nature of their perspective on the goodness of the Earth.
3. To discuss how their insights should shape our response to the environmental degradation of the species, ecosystem, and biosphere of the Earth today.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Caring for Creation (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “This Is My Father’s World” locate the familiar tune TERRA BEATA in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Comment

David McDuffie writes, “Christian believers and communities concerned with the protection of God’s good creation are asking with increasing urgency, ‘What is the relationship between Christianity and ecology?’ Answering the question is difficult because it involves careful contemplation of how Christian faith, rooted in the foundational witness of Scripture, can effectively address contemporary issues such as global climate change, scarcity of fresh water, threats to biodiversity, degradation of the world’s oceans, unsustainable agricultural practices, and deforestation.” What Christians need, he suggests, is a “theocentric vision for understanding and protecting the earth that is *thoroughly informed by Christian tradition* and grounded in biblical faith” (*Caring for Creation*, 89, italics added).

In this study Jame Schaefer begins to gather the resources we need from the Christian tradition. She surveys how three giants of theology – John Chrysostom (347-407), Augustine of Hippo (354-430), and Thomas Aquinas (1224/25-1274) – learned to value the goodness of the Earth through their study of the creation story in Genesis 1.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to lead you to a deeper appreciation of the beauty and goodness of the whole creation.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Genesis 1:1-2:4a from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

How we can rightly discern the goodness of the created order and come to value it? The short answer – “As the friends of God, we should come to know and value the creation as God knows and values it, insofar as we can” – requires considerable expansion. It raises more questions like these: “How does God value the elements

of creation?" "Is there even more value in the interrelations among the elements as well?" and "If our knowledge of the created order is so limited (in comparison with God's knowledge), how can we come to value it as God does?" Jame Schaefer traces the footsteps of three influential Christian teachers as they reflected on these issues in their sermons and tracts based on the creation story in Genesis 1.

Study Questions

1. Augustine traced our temptation to devalue certain aspects of the physical world to two causes: our limitations in knowing and loving the world, and our self-centeredness. On the one hand, since we cannot know all about the natural beings and forces and how they interrelate, we cannot properly value them. On the other, we tend to skew our judgments about the value of things positively if they benefit us, or negatively if they threaten us. These two causes combine to produce "the rashness of human folly" in judging elements of the world.

Through such hasty and anthropocentric judgments, Augustine and Chrysostom agree, we are second-guessing God's plan for the world and showing ingratitude to God. Aquinas suggests this anthropocentric stance is disobedient: after all, our "natural dominion" must be subordinate to God's "absolute dominion." This means that we should strive to know more about the world and care for it in ways consistent with God's plan for the world.

2. Schaefer sketches several answers to this question. First, we should "*value the evolutionary process*" through which we and the world's systems were created "by functioning constructively within it so it can continue to facilitate the emergence of more good and valuable entities." Second, we should "value *each species, the air, land, and water intrinsically*" and avoid interfering with "their survival needs." Third, we should value intrinsically and instrumentally the "*relations among species, air, land, and water.*" Fourth, we should "discover and acknowledge *the contributions that species and abiota make to their shared ecosystems,*" and we would value intrinsically and instrumentally "the *overall functioning of these systems.*"
3. By the "sacramental qualities" of other species, ecosystems and the biosphere, Schaefer means how they can be windows to the presence and nature of God. As we study and care for them, we glimpse something about "God's *self-limiting power* by endowing the universe with the innate ability to unfold in increasing diversity and complexity over expanding space and extending time; God's *freedom-giving* to the universe to self-organize without coercion; God's *generosity* through the seemingly endless potentialities with which God has endowed matter to develop creatively; God's *wisdom* through the physical laws within which chance occurrences are operative; God's *humility* by allowing the universe with its emerging diverse beings to play itself out in surprising ways amidst considerable suffering, decay, waste, and death; and, God's *patience* throughout the billions of years in which the universe has [developed]." Encourage members to share how their own study and care of the creation has influenced their view of God.
4. Pastor Babcock, the author of the hymn, enjoyed hiking along a high ridge near his home in Lockport, NY, from where he could see the farmland for about fifteen miles north to Ontario.[†] His lyric, written in 1901, suggests the intrinsic and instrumental value of "all nature" with its living and nonliving creatures. It is God's beloved world, and the second verse, as revised by his granddaughter, emphasizes that we should value it (as God does) by caring for it. There is no reference to the interrelationship of the world's systems being a greater good, which is the second insight that Schaefer discusses. Perhaps this feature of the goodness of the Earth is a recent "rediscovery" for us through the science of ecology.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

† "This Is My Father's World," www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/t/i/tismyfw.htm (accessed July 13, 2012).