

Religious Perspectives in Environmental Ethics

1. **What** are the religious perspectives in environmental ethics?

There are numerous religious perspectives in environmental ethics. Among them, the Judeo-Christian perspective is of particular importance, because of its influence over the development of Western ethics. Christianity and Judaism share some common scriptures, most notably what Jews call "the Hebrew Bible" or "Tanakh" and Christians call "the Old Testament". These scriptures are open to different interpretations about how human beings should treat the environment; some of these interpretations are grouped together under the title of stewardship, whilst others are grouped together under the title of dominion.



The Catholic Church: a Christian denomination that promotes stewardship.

Stewardship: the Christian practice of caring for the environment because it is a God-given gift. Stewards are inspired by Bible verses like Genesis 2:15 and Psalm 24:1. These passages state that Earth belongs to God, and human beings are required to tend and care for it on his behalf. Richard Bauckham (b. 1946) argues persuasively for this approach to environmental ethics.

Dominion: the Christian practice of subduing the environment because human beings are commanded to dominate it. Christians who adopt a dominion approach to environmental ethics are inspired by Bible verses like Genesis 1:26 and Genesis 1:28. These passages state that human beings have total control over Earth; however, critics claim they should not be read in isolation.

2. **How** do the religious perspectives in environmental ethics work?

The religious perspectives in environmental ethics are many and varied. Even among Christians, it is possible to adopt two distinct approaches: stewardship or dominion. Today, stewardship is the overwhelmingly popular approach to environmental ethics among Christians; however, this is not exclusively the case.

The Anglican Communion: Anglican churches adopt the view that responding to climate change is an essential part of the Christian responsibility to safeguard God's creation. Led by the Church of England, these churches have committed to shrinking carbon footprints (both their own, and those of affiliated organisations) and reducing plastic waste (especially waste produced by single-use plastics). Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby (b. 1956), described reducing the causes of climate change as essential to a life of faith, loving one's neighbour, and stewarding creation.

The Catholic Church: according to the Vatican, caring for the environment is the responsibility of all human beings, but Christians have a particular duty to protect Earth from damage. As a result of the activities of Pope Francis, the Catholic Church has become increasingly vocal on matters of environmental ethics, endorsing climate action and supporting environmentalism. In fact, Pope Francis's second papal encyclical (*Laudato Si'*, or Praise Be to You: On Care of Our Common Home) is on the subject of stewardship, and calls Catholics to make Earth a garden for humanity.



Justin Welby

The Cornwall Alliance: unlike the Anglican Communion and the Catholic Church, which both adopt a stewardship approach, the Cornwall Alliance embraces the perspective of dominion. It is an organisation that represents a large number of evangelical churches, most of which are located in the United States, and denies the existence of manmade climate change. In fact, the Cornwall Alliance claims that caring for the environment is unnecessary, because God's intelligent design of Earth ensures that human beings cannot irreversibly damage the world around them.

3. **Why** are the religious perspectives in environmental ethics important?

One significant reason why the religious perspectives in environmental ethics are important is because there are so many religious people on Earth. Today, there are approximately 2.2 billion Christians alive (28 percent of the world population), of whom 85 million belong to the Anglican Communion, 1.3 billion belong to the Catholic Church, and 100 million belong to United States evangelical churches. The numbers involved mean religious leaders are incredibly powerful, and their views have a significant effect on how religious people behave towards the environment. Importantly, the Cornwall Alliance has the ear of up to one-third of Americans; its adoption of a dominion approach to environmental ethics could have a significant effect on their contribution to climate change.

Beyond this, the religious perspectives in environmental ethics are important for reasons that are already familiar. Environmental issues present a significant threat to life on Earth: the Holocene extinction (also known as the Anthropocene extinction) is already under way, and human activity appears set to accelerate the extermination of nonhuman species. The consequences of environmental issues are universal (i.e. they affect all living things), potentially unlimited (i.e. they will affect future generations), and unrepairable. The religious perspectives in environmental ethics affect how religious people respond to these monumental problems, and may hold out hope for their resolution.

George Thinks

Religion is powerful stuff. Some devout believers follow their religious leaders unquestioningly. I think it's this force of faith that makes religions so effective at directing people's behaviour, particularly among those who practice the most. That's why *Laudato Si'* scared so many people; so much so, in fact, that shortly after its release Republican presidential candidate, Jeb Bush, had to assure business interests he wasn't swayed by it: "I hope I'm not going to get castigated for this by my priest back home, but I don't get my policy from my priests or my bishops or my cardinals or my pope," Pope Francis has put the Catholic Church on the march to a more environmentally conscious future, and it's highly possible that this will yield results.

You don't have to agree, of course, but I think the power of the religious perspectives is often overlooked. Take Earth Strike, for example, which involved over six million people worldwide. It was comfortably the largest mobilisation of environmentalists in history, and yet five times more Catholics attend mass each week in the United States alone. What I'm trying to point out is this: the scale of religious influence is huge. In an increasingly secular society, this isn't always recognised; however, it's possible that religious leaders have the power to change people's behaviour in ways that prominent environmentalists could only dream of. If this is the case, then religions may hold our hope for environmental salvation.

