

## Green Strands in Contemporary Christianity

By Petra Griffiths

Christianity has spent much of its life in theological and spiritual modes that separate us from the web of life. This has sadly played a considerable role in the damage we humans in the West have done to our eco system.



*Rev Dr Rowan Williams led prayers outside St Paul's Cathedral on Palm Sunday 2019, during the Extinction Rebellion protests in London.*

### The creation-centred tradition

It was a joy in the 1980s to discover from prophetic voices – particularly Matthew Fox – the presence of another creation-centred spiritual tradition, which has been integral to the Hebrew Scriptures as well as Christianity itself from the beginning. In Britain and Ireland the Celtic form of Christianity that was prevalent prior to the Synod of Whitby (664), is our main homegrown repository of a spirituality that was in touch with Nature, and its saints often lived in wild places such as Skellig Michael, a rocky island off the coast of Ireland.

The creation tradition knows humanity's place within the cosmos and understands salvation as blessing rather than deliverance from a state of sinfulness. "The universe itself, blessed and graced, is the proper starting point for spirituality", as Mathew Fox puts it in the introduction to *Original Blessing*. The term Original Blessing has become widely recognised within Christianity since that time. Matthew Fox and many other theologians put forward panentheism as the best way to understand the relationship between humans and the sacred. In panentheism the world is seen as being within God, and God seen as being immanent in the world though not limited to it – different from pantheism in which

the divine is seen as entirely within Nature. Katharine Jefferts Schori, former Presiding Bishop in the American Episcopalian (Anglican) Church has said that many Episcopalians are panentheistic.

## **Thomas Berry: The Universe as a communion of subjects not a collection of objects**

Thomas Berry was a Passionist priest, geologist (as he named himself in preference to theologian) and cultural historian. Thomas Berry's work was key in developing a new spiritual paradigm for our times, speaking of the continuing revelation that takes place in and through the Earth. He is known for articulating a "new story" of the universe that explores the implications of the evolutionary sciences and cultural traditions for creating a flourishing future. John F Haught, Larry Rasmussen and Mary-Evelyn Tucker have taken forward the work on the journey of the universe and the connection with ecology, with help from evolutionary cosmologist Brian Swimme (see booklist for details).

Thomas Berry put forward the idea that there are four sources of wisdom:

- \* indigenous wisdom with its intimacy with and participation in the natural world;
- \* the wisdom of women, joining the knowing of the body to that of the mind;
- \* revelatory experiences of a spiritual realm both transcendent and immanent;
- \* the wisdom of science.

## **Feminist and liberation theology**

The vision of Christianity being fully embodied on this Earth rather than centred in a future heaven is now recognised by many theologians and spiritual writers, and has been a significant theme within feminist theology and in liberation theology in South America. Sallie McFague in *The Body Of God: An Ecological Theology* argues that new metaphors can help give more adequate models for the ethically urgent task of caring for an ecologically fragile planet. Feminist and liberation theologians have made significant contributions to the development of a green Christianity. See the booklist for examples.

## **Pope Francis on care for our common home**

In 2015 Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Laudato Si* (Praise Be to You) brought these concerns right to the centre of Catholic engagement with the world:

"God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement. Everything is connected. Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society..."

## Green Christian strands in the UK

Bringing these themes closer to home, we have inspirational leaders in Green Christianity in the UK such as Professor Mary Grey, former editor of the journal *Eco Theology*. Mary Grey played an important part in the Green Christian campaign Joy in Enough <https://joyinenough.org/> JiE is a challenge to Christians in Britain, and an invitation to all people of good will, to join in building a just economy within the ecological limits of the Earth.

Professor Celia Deane Drummond, has recently taken up a position as Director of the Laudato Si Institute in Oxford, taking forward Pope Francis' vision, fostering interdisciplinary research and dialogue aiming towards an integration of ecology and human development.

## Christian Climate Action UK *Direct action, public witness for the climate*



CCA is inspired by Christ and social justice movements, and carries out acts of non-violent direct action to urge those in power to make the change needed. CCA supports Extinction Rebellion (XR), and aimed to take Lambeth Bridge as an interfaith initiative in the October XR London protests, though was prevented by the police from doing so.

The former Archbishop, Rt Rev Dr Rowan Williams, has been fulsome in his support for XR. He is a powerful exponent in the Anglican tradition of the understanding that Creation is not something that took place long ago, but is a continuous happening. He understands the Creative Spirit as active throughout all spheres of life, not just the human one. "In the sphere of ecology we are now more than ever conscious of the need for something like a religious perspective to be brought back into our attitude to a world that is not ours but is related to God before it is related to us. In the Bible God calls the world good before human beings are in it."

## Eco Church

As Chair of Christian Aid Rowan Williams was one of those launching the interdenominational project Eco Church in 2015. Eco Church is an award scheme for churches in England and Wales who want to demonstrate that "... the gospel is good news

for God's earth. Our vision is for churches of all denominations to care for creation as an integral part of loving their neighbours and following God faithfully." Eco Church helps churches who want to go green in practical ways, and insists that liturgy and theology



are a core part of the process. See <https://ecochurch.arocha.org.uk/resources/>

## Celtic Christianity today

A good example is the Community of Aidan and Hilda, a dispersed, ecumenical body drawing inspiration from the lives of the Celtic saints. The Open Gate, on Lindisfarne <https://www.aidanandhilda.org.uk/open-gate.php> is the main location for events. Courses are run on Celtic Christianity and Creation Spirituality. The Community aims to restore an holistic Christian spirituality reconnecting with the spirit and the scriptures, the saints and the streets, the seasons and the soil, weaving together the separated strands of Christianity and healing the land.

**Living Spirituality Connections** [www.livingspirit.org.uk](http://www.livingspirit.org.uk) (which I coordinate) is at the interface of action and contemplation. LSC has as key themes:

- \* The Creative Spirit, which has been present throughout the cosmos from the beginning
- \* The flourishing of the Earth and all life.

We explore these through workshops, talks and newsletters and a Facebook group, and link with other organisations such as GreenSpirit.

**St James's Piccadilly** is an example of a church that is taking seriously the need to be much more ecologically minded. St James's Sustainability Champion Deborah Colvin led a successful campaign to win an Eco Church Gold Award in 2018. This doesn't mean that everything is perfect in a grade one listed building with a very high ceiling, but St James's has achieved a huge reduction in energy use and is now carbon neutral. Community meals

are made with food that would otherwise be thrown out. Many measures have been taken to increase the biodiversity in the garden. Recycling is strongly encouraged and ethical purchasing policies are in place. St James's runs a lively series of workshops and talks on eco themes. Go to: <https://www.sjp.org.uk/ecochurch.html>

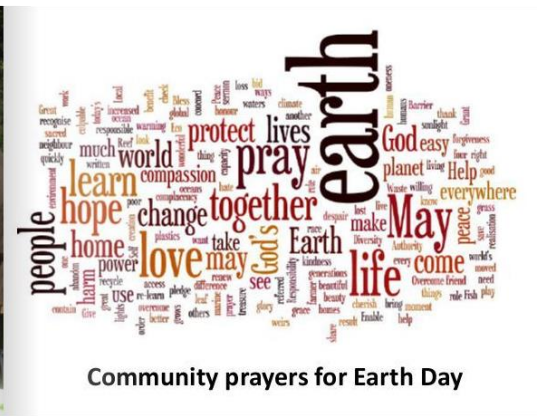
St James's also focuses on expressing the interconnectedness of life through liturgy, theology and art. Creationtide (an initiative of the World Council of Churches) is now established as part of the liturgical cycle in September of each year.

Art installations are powerful ways of articulating the St James's community's care about what is happening to the planet. Sara Mark's installation MUNDUS in April 2019 illustrates this:



MUNDUS was an outpouring of grief, made from wood-ash (an ancient symbol associated with mourning and penitence) adhered to the wall with water from the River Thames and honey (a substance with healing properties).

The Eco Church group puts on contemplative garden liturgies throughout the year, in which we relate directly to the plants, trees, birds and insects in the garden. Feedback on one of the services included "Very relaxed, contemplative and inspiring. A window into eternity."



y.”

Two young leaders of the garden liturgies have asked “We wonder if as a church we can look beyond emergency measures against climate change to become compassionate healers in a long-term partnership with the Earth? Can we become healers who can somehow ‘come alongside’ the Earth to share in its experiences and feel its pain and joy? Can we renew a sense of wonder which seeks an end to climate change in order that we might experience more of the Earth's beautiful, rich diversity?”

I’ll close with a significant extract from the sermon preached by Rev Lucy Winkett, Rector of St James’s, in her 2018 Harvest sermon:

“Theologically and spiritually, we require a revolution in how we look at the planet, which is a God’s eye view. ....Creation is like a love letter written by God to God’s beloved. This way of understanding can be very inspiring and, for me, reintroduces joy and delight into an environmental debate that can sometimes get a little bit earnest, and can make us playful again. In our liturgy we simply join in the praise being offered by the created order already.”

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**Booklist** (in the order of mention in the article)

Mathew Fox:

*Original Blessing*

*Creation Spirituality. Liberating Gifts for the Peoples of the Earth*

Thomas Berry:

*The Dream of the Earth*

*The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future*

*The Universe Story* co-authored with Brian Swimme

John F Haught: *The New Cosmic Story. Inside our Awakening Universe*

Larry Rasmussen: *Earth-Honoring Faith. Religious Ethics in a New Key*

Mary Evelyn Tucker:

*Journey of the Universe* co-authored with Brian Swimme

*Ecology and Religion* co-authored with John Grim

*Living Cosmology: Christian Responses to Journey of the Universe* co-edited with John Grim

Sallie McFague:

*A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming*

*The Body Of God: An Ecological Theology*

Pope Francis: *Laudato Si. On Care for our Common Home*

Mary Grey: *Sacred Longings: The Ecological Spirit and Global Culture*

Celia Deane Drummond: *A Primer in Ecotheology. Theology for a Fragile Earth*

Rosemary Radford Ruether: *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*

Elizabeth A Johnson: *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*

Leonado Boff: *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*