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Religious educators: Promoting an ecological balance

Shane D. Lavery

University of Notre Dame Australia, Shane.Lavery@nd.edu.au

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Title: Religious Educators: Promoting an Ecological Balance

Name: Associate Professor Shane Lavery

Position: Coordinator Post Graduate Studies School of Education, The University of Notre Dame Australia, Fremantle Campus

Email: shane.lavery@nd.edu.au

Abstract

This article explores the role of religious educators in developing young people as ecologically responsive citizens. Underpinning this role is an appreciation that creation is a gift from God, that one must act as a responsible steward of creation, and that the world's resources are to be used ethically. The article initially presents a Catholic approach to environmental concerns with particular reference to the statements of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. It then draws on statements from the publication *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* that relate to the protection of the environment. These statements provide a rich source of understanding for religious educators. The article subsequently describes ways the publication *On Holy Ground* can assist religious educators in designing an ecological framework within Catholic education. This description is followed by an outline of the vital role religious educators have in fostering a balanced and informed ecological approach with their students.

Key Words

Religious Educators, Ecological Education, Stewardship, God's Creation

Introduction

The ecological debate has tended to be dominated by the language of science (Millais, 2006). One can readily read of scientific concerns over climate change, global warming, acid rain, ecological footprints, carbon trading and environmental degradation. Such matters are most certainly deserving of serious scientific interrogation. However, issues surrounding the wellbeing of the natural environment “are not just scientific, technological, political and economic: at their foundation is the very nature of the person and our relationship with our Creator” (Toohey, 2008, p. 55). What, for instance, might be the religious, moral and ethical underpinnings as to why one should be a responsible environmental citizen in the first place? An appreciation that creation is a gift from God, the call to responsible stewardship, and concern for the ethical use of the world’s resources, are compelling reasons why one should be ecologically active. This article posits that religious educators are in a unique position to explore such issues in a balanced and informed manner with the young people whom they teach. While the article takes a specifically Catholic perspective, the author acknowledges the significant work being undertaken by other Christian traditions, and indeed, other faith traditions, in religious education in relation to ecological education (The Climate Institute, 2006).

A Catholic Approach to Ecological Awareness

As part of his 1990 New Year Message, Pope John Paul II highlighted the importance of a conscientious attitude towards the environment: “Christians, in particular, realize that responsibility within creation and their duty towards nature and the Creator, are an essential part of their faith” (para. 15). The Pope elaborated on this theme in his Message for The World Day of Peace (1999): “the world’s present and future depend on the safeguarding of creation, because of the endless interdependence between human beings and their environment” (para. 30). Moreover, he warned: “the danger of serious damage to land and sea, and to the climate, flora and fauna, calls for a profound change in modern civilization’s typical consumer life-style, particularly in the richer countries” (para 29). In his January 2001 General Audience, John Paul II reiterated these sentiments even more forcibly with the words: “If one looks at the regions of our planet, one realizes that humanity has disappointed the divine expectation ... humiliating ... the earth, that flower-bed that is our dwelling” (para 4). Further, he articulated the need to “stimulate and sustain the ‘ecological conversion,’

... which has made humanity more sensitive when facing the catastrophe toward which it was moving” (para. 5).

Within Australia, the Catholic Bishops published the document *A New Earth – The Environmental Challenge* as their social justice statement for 2002. The statement elaborated on humanity’s connectedness with the universe, outlined the beauty and diversity of our national heritage, and articulated the Church’s desire “to stand in solidarity with the poor and marginalized, and to exercise good stewardship of the fragile ecosystems that support life on earth” (p. 8). This was also the year that the Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference founded the ecological agency, Catholic Earthcare Australia. In 2003 members of several religious orders established the EarthSong Project. One of the Project’s key ventures was the periodical *Earth Song Journal* that promotes eco-literacy within the Australian context. During November 2005, Catholic Earthcare Australia organised a three-day conference on climate change involving local and international scientists, theologians and activists (Rue, 2009, p. 21). In line with these initiatives, the Catholic Educational Leadership Conference of 2008, held in Western Australia, ran two concurrent environmental sessions: “God, the Universe and Humans,” and “Stimulating and Sustaining the Ecological Conversion” (Catholic Education Office Western Australia, 2008).

Since his election, Pope Benedict XVI has been proactive in his statements on environmental issues. In January, 2008 he highlighted the need for ecological responsibility: “We need to care for the environment; it has been entrusted to men and women to be protected and cultivated with responsible freedom, with the good of all as a constant guiding criterion” (Caritas Internationalis, n.d., para. 1). That same year he called on all young people “to support and practise ways of behaviour that help to appreciate and defend nature” (CathNews, 2008, para. 26). In his 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI clearly reiterated the Catholic Church’s environmental commitment when he noted: “the Church has a responsibility towards creation and she must assert this responsibility in the public sphere” (para. 51). Further, the Pope pointed out that the Church is required to “defend not only earth, water and air as gifts of creation that belong to all”, but must “above all protect mankind from self-destruction” (para. 51). In early January 2010, Benedict XVI exercised this responsibility when he denounced the failure of world leaders to agree

to a new climate change treaty in Copenhagen, criticising the economic and political resistance to addressing environmental degradation (Willey, 2010).

A Social Justice Perspective

The Catholic Church publication *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, authored by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (2004), provides a strong social justice perspective on ecological issues. The relevant chapter, entitled 'Safeguarding the Environment', is set out under four themes: Biblical Aspects, Man and the Universe of Created Things, The Crisis in the Relationship between Man and the Environment, and A Common Responsibility (p. xii). These themes offer a rich source of material for religious educators in any teaching and discussion of ecological issues. Within the theme, Biblical Aspects, the Pontifical Council stresses that nothing stands outside of salvation. That is, "the whole of creation participates in the renewal flowing from the Lord's Paschal Mystery" (para. 455). The Christian is called "to serve Christ, to live according to his Spirit, guided by love, the principle of a new life, that brings the world and man back to their original destiny" (para. 455).

Two critical considerations are raised under the theme, Man and the Universe of Created Things. First, underpinning every scientific and technological application ought to be "respect for men and women, which must also be accompanied by a necessary attitude of respect for other living creatures" (para 459). The Pontifical Council (2004) observes, however, that applications of discoveries "in the fields of industry and agriculture have produced harmful long-term effects" (para 459). These effects, they note, have led "to the painful realization" that humanity "cannot interfere in one area of the ecosystem without paying due attention to the consequences of such interference in other areas and to the well-being of future generations" (para. 459). Second, humanity must understand that the ability to transform and redesign the world "is always based on God's prior and original gift of the things that are" (para. 460). Arbitrary use of the earth devoid of any sense of restraint as though the earth "did not have its own requisites and a prior God-given purpose" (para. 460) is summarily condemned.

The third theme, The Crisis in Relationships between Man and the Environment, highlights the "tendency towards an 'ill-considered' exploitation of the resources of

the earth” as “the result of a long historical and cultural process” (para. 461). The Pontifical Council (2004) posits that “a correct understanding of the environment prevents the utilitarian reduction of nature to a mere object to be manipulated and exploited” (par. 463). Key to this understanding is an appreciation that humanity and nature are inextricably linked to the transcendent. It is under this theme of “Crisis” that the Pontifical Council declares: “The Magisterium underscores human responsibility for the preservation of a sound and healthy environment for all” (para 465). To this effect, the Pontifical Council suggests that if humanity can succeed in combining scientific advancements with a strong ethical dimension, it will unquestionably promote the environment as a home and resource for all, eliminate the causes of pollution, and ensure adequate conditions of hygiene and health for all human communities, both large and small (para. 465).

The final theme, A Common Responsibility, acknowledges that care and responsibility for the environment (a) represents a challenge for all of humanity; (b) extends not only to present needs but also to those of the future; (c) should find adequate expression at a juridical level; (d) respects the integrity of the cycles of nature as natural resources which are limited and in some cases not renewable; and (e) appreciates that the relationship of indigenous people to the land deserves particular attention, as it is a fundamental expression of their identity (paras. 446-471). Further, the Pontifical Council (2004) highlights the need for a responsible use of modern biotechnologies that have such a “powerful social, economic and political impact locally, nationally and internationally” (para. 474). The Council draws the link between the environment and the sharing of goods. That is, the goods of the earth “were created by God to be used wisely by all. They must be shared equitably in accordance with justice and charity” (para. 481). The adverse affect of the present environmental crisis on those who are poorest is stressed (para 482) along with the universal and inalienable right to safe drinking water (para. 485). Lastly, the Pontifical Council proposes that “serious ecological problems call for an effective change of mentality leading to the adoption of new lifestyles” (para. 486). In particular, there is need to break with the logic of mere consumerism, to promote forms of agriculture and industrial production which value the order of creation and meet the basic human needs of all, and to encourage a renewed awareness of the interdependence of all inhabitants of the earth.

Catholic Education

One of the most significant Australian Catholic initiatives towards education for the environment has been the 2006 publication *On Holy Ground*, co-authored by Catholic Earthcare Australia and Catholic Education Offices in Queensland and NSW (Rue, 2009, p. 21). Bishop Putney established the tone of the publication in the ‘Greeting’ (Catholic Earthcare Australia, 2006, p. 2), when he stated that the document was not simply presenting an argument from science, social theory or economics but rather, one “drawn from the very heart of the scriptures that calls us to adopt an ecological concern and commitment precisely because we are Christians.” The publication stressed the critical role of Catholic educators in promoting the Church’s call to ‘Ecological conversion’. Ecological education was defined as:

... a life-long process of recognising values and clarifying concepts in order to develop skills and attitudes necessary to understand and appreciate the interconnectedness of all creation; to know of creation as a gift from God which requires equitable sharing and wise stewardship. It also entails practise in decision making for living a life that is ecologically and ethically sustainable. (Catholic Earthcare Australia, 2006., p. 6)

Further, the publication presented a long-term vision for Catholic ecological education that involved embedding ecological values into school programs and practices (p. 6). Three specific goals were detailed: (a) to foster in students an appreciation of creation as a gift, their relation with creation, and their responsibility as co-creators for its future; (b) to develop in students the knowledge, skills attitudes, values and commitment to initiate individual and collective responses that are environmentally responsible and reflective of their ecological vocation; and (c) to inspire students to decrease their ecological footprint and increase their spiritual one, as creatures made in the image and likeness of God (p. 6).

The South Australian edition of *On Holy Ground*, published in 2010, introduced the concept of the ASSISI program, A Strategic Systems-based Integrated Sustainability Initiative designed as “a strategic pathway for Catholic schools to engage with answering the call for ecological conversion and sustainability” (Catholic Earthcare Australia, 2010, p. 22). ASSISI has six components: Whole School Planning, Religious Dimension, Teaching and Learning, Ethical Resource Use, Cultivating Grounds and Buildings, and Community Relationships (Catholic Earthcare Australia,

2010, pp. 20-21). Such a broad approach to environmental education addressed concerns previously raised by commentators such as Orr (2004) that the words ‘environmental education’ implied “education about the environment, just another course or two, a curricular outbuilding to the big house of formal schooling where the really important things go on” (p. 18). ASSISI suggests a deeper transformation of the substance, practice and scope of education to prepare students as ecologically aware citizens.

Religious Educators and Ecological Education

Religious educators play a significant role in developing an informed ecological awareness and participation in young people. In light of the ASSISI program for schools, two aspects are presented: the Religious Dimension and Teaching and Learning. The Religious Dimension incorporates three elements that involve the whole school community. These are to regularly reflect and respond to sacred scripture that highlights the relationship between humanity, our Creator and creation; to reflect and respond to Catholic social teaching on ecology; and to develop liturgy, prayer and celebrations that enable schools to focus on caring for God’s creation (Catholic Earthcare Australia, 2010, p. 23). Religious educators, through their training and expertise, are in a significant position to lead their school communities in such activities, both in the classroom setting and in the wider school environment. The environmental teachings presented in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* are of particular importance in this respect.

The Teaching and Learning component of the ASSISI school program delineates six recommendations, the first of which is the importance for Catholic schools to “identify and integrate areas of the Religious Education curriculum relevant to ecological education” (Catholic Earthcare Australia, 2010, p. 24). For instance, in Western Australia, the Year Eight Religious Education curriculum has as one of its four teaching topics, ‘Creation God’s Original Plan’ (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2007, p. 1). Key ecological issues addressed in this topic include respect for creation, the proper use of resources, the unique place of humanity within creation, the Christian notion of stewardship and the importance of developing a sense of stewardship for God’s creation (pp. 141-150). The corresponding Year 10 curriculum provides a forum for students to explore the importance of harmony

between humanity and the rest of creation, as well as the social justice imperative that the earth's resources are intended for every person's basic needs (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2009a, pp. 295-302). In the Year 11 Religious Education curriculum, students study ways "Christians promote proper use of the goods of the earth through the Seventh Commandment" (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2009b, p. 79). Topics examined include: stewardship and sustainability, the non-exploitation of resources, respect for the integrity of all creation, and a moral dimension to all economic activity (pp. 79-88).

The right relationship between humanity, our Creator and creation, the ethical use of the earth's resources, and the need to care responsibly for God's creation, are concepts that can impact so positively on young people when presented from a faith and values-based perspective. Treston (2003), for instance, maintains that to restore a healthy earth involves not simply a dramatic change in life styles, but rather "a radical moral and spiritual conversion that connects us with a Creator God and the whole of the earth community" (p. 9). Such a conversion, he argues, is founded on "a profound sense of wonder and awe at the mystery of creation, formed and shaped by a bountiful Creator" (p. 17). Hill (2004) contends that within the contemporary secular era, materialism and consumerism can separate the spiritual from the 'real world', where importance is viewed in terms of profit and usefulness. Goods are to be merely used and then dispensed with. He suggests that separation of the material from the spiritual, in essence, religion from life, may well be a factor in the environmental crisis. As he notes: "without spiritual values, industry and business have no reason to sustain the material world" (p. 163). Religious educators, through the use of appropriate curriculum, are in a strong position to explore the environment and environmental issues from a Christian/Catholic faith standpoint and in terms of values.

Edwards (2010), when examining the notion of Christian ecology, also points to the importance of a spiritual conversion. In this case, it is a spiritual conversion that he believes has resulted in the emergence of a new form of global spirituality entitled "planetary spirituality" (p. 16) – a growing movement of people "who are connected in a common love of Earth and its creatures" (p. 17). Edwards argues that planetary spirituality involves not only a genuine receptivity and respect for the natural world,

“but a deep sense of global solidarity, and a radical, life-long commitment to act for the good of the whole Earth community (p. 17). At the heart of this spirituality is an appreciation that “life in all its diversity and beauty is a most beautiful and precious gift” (Edwards, p. 17). It is a gift “given by a generous and bountiful God” (p. 17) that should not to be abused or wasted. The salient point is that while transformation to an ecological awareness has begun, it needs the best efforts of the human community to succeed. In this respect, Edwards argues that the role of world religions is crucial, given that, for many people, their faith tradition is at the centre of who they are. Within the Catholic/Christian tradition, religious education has a decisive function in the development of religious, spiritual, and moral values and attitudes of young people, the future leaders of society. Religious educators, by virtue of the work they undertake with students in and outside of the classroom, can have a profound effect on the way young people view the natural world.

Conclusion

Humanity needs to make “sound moral judgments concerning the present use of the world’s goods and the future of the world” (Toohey, 2008, p. 47). These judgments, Toohey argues, must be made as part of a partnership involving “God as Creator and human beings as stewards of what God has made” (p. 47). Stewardship is both a privilege and a duty. As humanity’s power and influence has increased through scientific and technological advances, so “responsibility for the use of those powers in ways that conform with the divine purpose increases proportionally” (Toohey, p. 49). In reiterating Pope John Paul II’s belief that the present ‘ecological crisis’ is primarily an ethical and moral issue, Pope Benedict XVI (2010) commented that it would be “irresponsible not to take seriously” (para. 4) the growing environmental predicament. Religious educators have an integral role in Catholic/Christian education. By use of “theology, scripture, church history and catechesis, they relay the Christian message of God’s intervention into human history” (Lavery, 2009, p. 34). Part of that Christian message is a balanced understanding that the earth is a gift from God, that humans are called to responsible stewardship of this gift, and that there is an ethical imperative to share the world’s resources equitably.

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