



Rev Brian Polkinghorne shares his farming and environmental experience with a farmer and his family in Tanzania.

The "R and R" of ecotheology

Rev Brian Polkinghorne

My thinking about ecotheology has brought me to a deep sense of “R and R”– not rest and recreation, but reverence and respect. It wasn’t always that way for me. I was brought up on a farm where I adopted a crude philosophy – “If it moves, shoot it; if it grows, chop it down.” That philosophy was underpinned by my juvenile understanding of theology.

During my childhood, many preachers expounded on Genesis 1:28 (the King James Version, which was the only one available to me at the time):

“And God blessed them and God said unto them ... have dominion over all the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”

In addition to this, the most commonly used responsive reading during worship was from Psalm 8:

“For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet.”

So, when I applied the first tank load of DDT (dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane) to totally destroy an outbreak of red-legged earth mites on our clover, I said to myself that I was doing God’s work by demonstrating my dominion. How ashamed I am of that attitude now.

I was raised on a totally anthropocentric theology, believing that human beings are the centre of the universe. I now consider this a distortion of the Good News.

The scales started to drop from my eyes when I meditated on the meaning and application of Psalm 24:1: “The earth is the Lord’s.” Of course it must be so, I mused, because God made it.

Meaning that everything I touch, eat, breathe and drink has a sacredness to it – the hand of God is in it and on it. These claims of God’s ownership resonate throughout the whole Bible, with particularly strong points made in Leviticus 25:23 and Psalm 50.

For me, the natural conclusion of this thinking is the need to respect and revere the whole of creation because it belongs to God. Late Uniting Church minister, Rev Dr Geoff Scott, aptly encompassed this attitude in the following quote: “Our dominion of the world is to be as God’s dominion over us – loving, cherishing and nurturing.” This idea is a key component of ecotheology, a constructive theology that focuses on the interrelationships of religion and nature. This consideration and application of theology was very different to the way I was brought up.

The true challenge to my anthropocentric thinking came when I began to consider the way I had compartmentalised certain plants, animals and insects into “good” and “bad” categories. I slowly grew to understand that God’s saving love for creation was not exclusive to humans but was inclusive of the whole created realm. This was clearly outlined in the story of the first Covenant: “And God said, ‘I am giving you a sign of my covenant with you and with all living creatures, for all generations to come’” (Genesis 9:12). This phrase was then repeated four times, seeming to emphasise the inclusivity of God’s salvation for all living creatures. I later found this idea of inclusivity repeated throughout the Bible.

With this new perspective, I have begun to identify many other passages in the Bible that speak of the role of God and Jesus in creating all life. As a Christian, we are called to revere and respect God, and I believe that revering and respecting his creation is a key element to this calling.

For more information about ecotheology, please visit unitingearthweb.org.au