

Is plastic in the oceans a biological problem? A scientific problem? A social problem? A moral problem? A religious problem?

Yes, Yes, Yes, Yes and Yes.

The plastic harms many biological species, both in the oceans and on land. Science enables us to produce plastic, but it has not (yet) shown how we can dispose of it sustainably. As we know, reducing plastic in the ocean will require the efforts of many people. Whether humanity solves the problems of plastic in the oceans is likely to depend, in part, on whether we believe preserving the planet is our responsibility, a matter of right and wrong. Many people derive their moral sense from religion; they define right and wrong in terms of their beliefs about the divine, the after-life (if any), their purpose for existing, and so on. What is more, environmentalists, politicians and scientists are becoming increasingly certain that, unless society can appeal to the morality in mitigating environmental problems such as plastic in the oceans, only limited progress can be made. The solutions they have proposed—new machines, scientific findings, regulations, awareness and education—while helpful, are not achieving the effects needed to avoid intolerable pollution, resource depletion and climate change. They realize those externalities can get us only so far, unless we talk about changing humanity, transforming our values, and reorienting us towards new goals. Some even claim the survival of humanity requires changes that could be considered spiritual: concerned with how we relate to the divine, and possibly involving a resetting of the reasons we

believe we are on the planet.

For instance, Aldo Leopold, American author, scientist, ecologist, and forester, wrote that the mindset of the industrial age is basically antagonistic to conservationism. Caring for the environment is largely out of our reach “without creating a new kind of people.”

In similar fashion, Peter Sengue, author of the book “Presence” opined that, if we aim to make a difference for the future of the environment, we must go beyond piecemeal gestures. We must perceive and radically transform the philosophical and religious “systems” forming the milieu in which we are embedded. Avoiding environmental catastrophe requires, in short, a radical change of the human heart.

Charles Reich, in “The Greening of America,” 1970, talked about a so-called “Consciousness III,” the process of revolutionizing society through what he regarded “a new way of living--almost a new man.” Our society, he said, is founded on the belief that life is essentially economic, and improving it requires optimizing the production of goods and services. In response, Reich asks how better economic production can, on its own, find answers to the crucial problems of race relations, environment and the Vietnam military conflict? To the contrary, our new ways of making more things often worsen those types of problems. He called, instead, for allowing the individual to regain his own uniqueness, his self, and for restoring technology to a place of servanthood rather than mastery. Reich’s claim

that this consciousness was starting to have an effect might have been premature; nonetheless, his proposals resonate well with others' conclusion that the externalities of science, technology and education cannot by themselves head off environmental overshoot.

Jim Gustav Speth, in his book "The Bridge to the End of the World," summarizes all these writings and more. Marshalling sobering facts, he illustrates how humankind, motivated largely by economic aims, has taxed the Earth's resources beyond their capacity to regenerate. By creating a culture that worships consumption, capitalism has combined with political self-interest and misguided policies to hasten the environment's demise. He says that today's problems call for a new kind of mind. Our old solutions & mindset will not work. We are too biased towards anthropocentrism, materialism, reductionism, egocentrism, contempocentrism, nationalism, and rationalism, to sustain the needed changes; for that reason, the environmental movement launched in the 1970s failed. Speth concluded that, to preserve the habitability of the planet, society must alter its priorities, and that, in turn, requires instigating cultural change at the deepest levels.

All these authors are saying that, to solve the environmental crisis—which, the past couple of decades have shown, needs to include managing plastics in the ocean—we must create a new kind of human. How do we do that, though? While science has momentarily facilitated using (and, lately, over-using) the natural resources around us, it doesn't tell us how to change human nature.

[Christians and Climate Change](#)

Regions:

Christianity - Author Andrew Hartley

Yet, to Christians, this talk about transforming human nature sounds very familiar: Jesus said, “[N]o one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” (John 3:3), and the Apostle Paul wrote that, “if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (2 Cor 5:17). Should we be surprised, then, if religion can do what previous environmental movements—guided, mostly, by science—have failed to do? If so, how might this occur?

Katherine Hayhoe, PhD, a Christian and a climate scientist, has explained the separate, though necessary and interacting, roles of science and religion in tackling environmental challenges. Science, she says, excels at prediction contingent upon specified human actions: For instance, assuming business-as-usual anthropogenic emissions of carbon dioxide, science can predict, with some precision and certainty, the global mean surface temperature in, say, the year 2050. Science has, in short, developed uncanny abilities to answer questions regarding “what?”

Despite science's remarkable prediction abilities, though, it cannot, on its own, tell us reasons any particular action is preferable to another. While it's great at answering the "what" questions, science is silent on the "why" questions. It cannot motivate us to act in any specific way or, indeed, to act at all.

Religion, on the other hand, addresses questions about "why." Christianity, for example, not only commands to seek the good of fellow humans, and the health of the environment (including the oceans) they depend on; this religion also declares several reasons for all to do so. Some of these reasons will be enumerated below. One fundamental reason, though, is that faith in God, and the realization that Christ laid down His life for me (to give me the free gift of eternal life), compel me, likewise, to lay down my life for others (John 3:16; 1 John 3:16). In this way, a Christian is a "new creation," transformed by God to serve others and the earth as acts of love and gratitude, rather than as means of earning God's favor.

The potential for religion to revolutionize environmentalism—and, in particular, reduce plastic waste in the oceans—is enhanced by the ubiquity and centrality of religion in America: Most Americans consider themselves religious, and draw on their faith traditions for a variety of benefits, including assurance of a right relationship with the divine, moral guidance, and a sense of meaning. Many of them, though, never discern the connections between their religious beliefs and caring for the environment, and some are even repulsed by the

suggestion that religious people should concern themselves with it.

Ed Brown [1], for example, writes of meeting a well-known Christian leader who was visibly surprised that such a project as “Christian environmentalism” would exist, and who doubted that Christians should go out of their way to reduce pollution or preserve natural resources. Mr. Brown claims that Christianity, as practiced in the U.S., at least, does not emphasize creation care; after speaking with hundreds about the environment, I am obliged to agree with him. Much room seems to exist, then, for improving the consistency between how we treat the oceans and the Bible’s message that God loves everything He made—including the corals, octopi, whales and even animals that are unpleasant for humans, such as jellyfish.

We praise and thank You, Lord,
for the gift of living water.

Guide us
to use it wisely,
learn from its humility,
consume it sparingly,
and protect its purity,
so that with St. Francis,
we may truly

enjoy water

Amen.

**- by Br. Cathal Duddy ofm,
Animator in the Franciscan Province of Ireland**

In a nutshell, the Bible can be viewed as the story of God's salvation, told in three steps:

Creation: God created a good universe and tasked humans with caring for it; Fall: Humans revolted against God and mismanaged creation; and Redemption: Christ paid the penalty for humans' rebellion, so that God can forgive those who choose Him and they can be restored to communion with Him and to proper care of creation.

The following sections summarize that story, emphasizing its implications for humans' relationships with the oceans and, more generally, the natural world.

CREATION

God's love story with the natural environment He made begins at the beginning of the Christian Bible: Genesis 1. As God created each element of the environment—the light, the atmosphere and seas, the dry land and plants, and so on—He called it “good” or “beautiful.” Revelation 4:11 sheds more light on that goodness and beauty, telling us He created those natural wonders “for His pleasure.”

Colossians 1 says all these things were made not only by Christ, but for Christ. Psalm 104:10-18 describes how God cares for such creatures as birds, donkeys, cattle and trees, making sure their needs are met. After He created it all, Genesis 1 records that God even looked at it all & called it “very good” He then took rest and, it seems safe to infer, His “pleasure,” cited in Revelation, was great.

Humans were part of that “very good” creation, and yet, of all that God fashioned, humans are unique. No other beings

are said to be made “in God’s image” (Genesis 1:26), or are tasked with “ruling over” other living things. While the “made in God’s image” phrase conveys many meanings, a key implication is that humans are to represent God to the rest of creation: imitating Him as He lovingly serves it, provides for it and protects it. The “ruling over” might, by itself, seem somewhat broad and subject to different interpretations; however, a wide array of subsequent passages of the Bible, such as the following, places qualifications on it and delimits its meanings:

Genesis 2:15 shows that this “ruling over” includes tending (bringing out latent goodness) and keeping (protecting); moreover, these are the first recorded tasks for humanity.

The fact that, in Genesis 9:9, God commands Noah to save two of every species—even species that would kill humans if given a chance—suggests God cares for all living things, regardless of whether they are useful for us, so that our

“tending and keeping” must be very broad and all-encompassing. In Leviticus 23:22, God commands His people to leave some of the cultivated land fallow, and, after the harvest, to allow the poor access to the gleanings.

Leviticus 25:1-7 teaches God’s people to allow the land to rest one year out of every seven, and the crops that grow during that year are to be shared with “your male and female servants, and the hired worker and temporary resident who live among you, as well as for your livestock and the wild animals in your land.” Animal cruelty is inconsistent with that “ruling over.” For example, Israel was to allow a newborn ox or sheep to remain with its mother seven days (Leviticus 22:37), and allow an ox treading out grain to eat as it works (Deuteronomy 25:4). A

righteous person will “have regard for the life of his animal” (Proverbs 12:10). The many Biblical passages like the above concerning creation care together form what Stephen Jurovics [2] calls the “collective view” about God’s design for how humans were to maintain harmony with the environment (We might guess, too, that, had the Israelites lived on or beside the oceans, God would have commanded them to preserve the oceans as well).

FALL

God set humans in the Garden of Eden, providing them “every tree that is pleasant for the sight and good for food,” meeting their needs. However, they rebelled, eating the one fruit God told them not to eat. Thus, they broke their communion with God, the only One Who can satisfy them. Any person’s relationship with God is foundational to every aspect of life; so, when those humans broke that relationship, their other relationships—with themselves, with other people, and with their environment—were broken as well. In particular, their relationship with the environment was broken when they started to regard it as their possession to exploit, instead of something God has commanded them to care for.

Humans chose not to worship God; they ceased meeting their needs by loving and obeying Him. They turned instead to created things (Romans 1:25) for their fulfillment, which is a fruitless venture, since only God can satisfy certain needs. A few centuries ago, Blaise Pascal (French mathematician, physicist, and religious philosopher) described this frustration as follows: “What else does this craving, and this helplessness,

proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words, by God himself.” -

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Nowadays, too, this misguided searching persists; John DeGraaf [3] calls it a “perpetual, gnawing sense of dissatisfaction” that fills shopping malls with people who already own more than they can use or can even pay off. As humans have tried incessantly to find satisfaction independently of God, a host of “isms” have emerged as “God substitutes,” such as narcissism (excessive interest in or admiration of oneself and one's physical appearance), Machiavellianism (employment of cunning and duplicity in statecraft or in general conduct, often to manipulate other people), and economic materialism (belief that what matters is owning possessions). Each of these “isms” entails a departure from those first tasks of tending and keeping creation, mentioned above, and each adversely impacts self, others and the environment. The impacts are too varied to list exhaustively here, but plainly include excessive pollution and depletion of natural resources. As a narcissist prioritizes his or her appearance over all else, for example, s/he will tend to purchase beauty products regardless of the harms their chemicals cause to waterways.

Machiavellianism has triggered military conflicts, the environmental consequences of which are usually severe

and persistent. An economic materialist's excessive urge to accumulate belongings is especially harmful environmentally, since those belongings must be manufactured, transported, guarded against theft, lubricated, painted, stored, shined and so on. These effects of separation from God on the natural world show how the environmental crisis is, at least in part, a spiritual crisis.

REDEMPTION

The Bible not only recognizes the damage humans inflict on the earth, but also confirms that repairing it will require a transformation of humanity, akin to the "new kind of people" Aldo Leopold called for:

For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. (Romans 8:19-22)

These verses encapsulate the environmental crisis as well as its cause and cure. They characterize the crisis as one of "decay," "groaning" and "frustration." In other words, creation wastes away and experiences pain because it has not fulfilled its purpose, which, as was explained above, is to please God. The cause of the crisis, we learn here, has not been the natural world itself, but the choices of humans, because of whom the land was cursed (Genesis 3:17). The solution to the crisis is the "revealing" of the "children of God." Nonetheless, not just any children of God will solve

the crisis; in Greek—the language of the book of Romans—the word translated here as “children” is “mature children.”

How should we understand this “mature children” phrase? The preceding verses, Romans 8:1-18, provide the needed context. They explain redemption, the third step in God’s plan of salvation: Jesus paying the price for the sin of those who accept Him, granting them eternal life as a free gift (Romans 8:1), and filling them with the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:14-16).

That Spirit, the Bible teaches, fulfills God’s will in several ways—creating the world, revealing Jesus to humans, and more. One specific role of the Holy Spirit, though, cultivates maturity in God’s children: the role of equipping people for service to God, so that they bear the Spirit’s “fruit:” love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-3). In myriad ways, these traits offer hope for mitigating the problem of plastics in the ocean, once large numbers of Christians become aware of their created purpose to tend and keep creation (Genesis 2:15) and of God’s call to fix that problem. For example:

- a. love for God’s creation, and humans who depend on it (that’s all of us), can compel them to seek the best for the oceans and their creatures
- b. peace with themselves can lessen—or even eliminate—the felt need to confirm their self-worth by accumulating possessions excessively and, thus, unduly harming the environment, and peace with other people can promote cooperation and synergies as we work together to help the oceans; both of these can foster peace with the oceans

c. patience can enable them to continue campaigning on behalf of the oceans, despite the enormity of the crisis, and setbacks such as the rejections of others

d. kindness (mildness of temper, calmness of spirit, an unruffled disposition, urbanity and politeness) can catalyze and preserve communication lines between people of different persuasions about plastics and the oceans and so on.

In summary, at least ideally, Christ's redemption reconciles His followers to God; that reconciliation, in turn, cascades to the filling of the Holy Spirit, the maturity of God's people, and the healing of the oceans.

BIBLICAL REASONS TO CARE FOR THE OCEANS – AN ENUMERATION

People like stories. Stories are memorable. Jesus often taught with stories. Therefore, many will find the above summary of the bible, in the form of a story, persuasive, captivating and helpful. Others, though, can more easily grasp, remember and follow concise checklists; for them, the following itemization of Biblical reasons to care for the oceans may be useful [4]:

Reason

Summary Statement

Selected Supporting Scripture

Earthkeeping

God commands caring for the oceans; those who love God will obey His commands

Genesis 1:26; Genesis 2:15; John 14:21

Mutuality

Humans depend on the earth, and the earth depends on humans

Genesis 2:15; Leviticus 25:3; Deuteronomy 20:19

Artistry

Creation is God's artistic masterpiece, and humans must keep it beautiful

Psalm 19:1; Proverbs 8:30 (where God is called "master craftsman"); Job 38-41

Character

Humans must take on God's character, loving creation because God loves it

Genesis 2:7; Psalm 104:10-18; 1 John 3:16

SUMMARY

The above outline of the Bible, and the list of reasons for caring for the oceans, are but a cursory introduction to Biblical environmental themes. All in all, though, they offer a glimpse into Christianity's multifaceted call to care for creation.

REFERENCES FOR FURTHER READING

[1] Brown, Ed

[2] Stephen Jurovics

[3] John DeGraaf

[4] Brunner, Butler & Swoboda

This page aims to show how some religious answers to “why” questions, coupled with science’s answers to “what” questions, can guide and motivate many people to care better for the oceans. Currently, only Christian perspectives are offered; however, perspectives from other religions will be added.