Religion and Climate Change: Christianity

A Study Pack

Examine Religious Responses to the Ecological and Climate Crisis

Understand Religious Diversity

Level of Study: Key Stage 5 | Duration of study time: 8 hours

Authors:
Dr Maria Nita, The Open University
Dr Paul-François Tremlett, The Open University
Dr Kate Christopher, RE Online

This study pack aims to introduce students to some key concepts related to religion and climate change, as well historical and sociological approaches to the Study of Religions and Worldviews. The pack comprises of a set of enrichment activities which can be used by teachers as classroom material. It contains four 2-hour lessons, and each lesson includes two 50 minutes activities and some final questions. Each lesson involves reading, critical analysis and reflection.

Religion is a powerful force for change, as well as a powerful force for resisting change. Religions shape individuals and communities locally, nationally, and globally. What religions have to say about nature, animals and humans can potentially contribute to climate change and contribute to action to help slow climate change and reach a sustainable transition to a green society.

Climate change is the key issue of our time. Our very survival depends on the steps we take now to cut carbon emissions and curb anthropogenic – that is human caused – climate change. In this study pack students will explore how religion – specifically Christianity – informs debates about climate change and contributes to climate action.

The aim of this pack is to introduce key concepts and ideas relating to religion and climate change, with a focus on Christianity, its diversity of traditions and viewpoints.

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LESSON 1 THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN TRADITION AND 'ANTHROPOCENTRISM'

In 1967, the American historian Lyn White Jr (White, 1967) wrote an essay called 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis'. White's argument was that, whether we are Christian or not, a basic Judeo-Christian perspective on the human relationship with nature pervades much of contemporary Western society and culture. That perspective sees nature as a resource that exists for the benefit of humans and sees human as an exceptional species that somehow stands outside of or above nature. According to White, the exceptional position of humans in nature can be summed up as *anthropocentrism,* an attitude which is found in the biblical story of creation, in which Adam has a privileged place within creation as a whole. Scholars, scientists and Christians agree that we need to radically alter this view if we are going to be able to address climate change. Moreover, given the supposed religious origins of anthropocentrism, Lyn White Jr suggested that the solution to it should come from religion.

1.1 Lynn White Jr.'s critique of the book of Genesis

Read the following excerpt from Lyn White Jr, feel free to make notes and identify new terms (here is a link to an online dictionary).

NB. The words in italics have been added for you to the Glossary box (below).

What did Christianity tell people about their relations with the environment? While many of the world's mythologies provide stories of creation, Greco-Roman mythology was singularly incoherent in this respect. Like Aristotle, the intellectuals of the ancient West denied that the visible world had a beginning. Indeed, the idea of a beginning was impossible in the framework of their cyclical notion of time. In sharp contrast, Christianity inherited from Judaism not only a concept of time as nonrepetitive and *linear* but also a striking story of creation. By gradual stages a loving and all-powerful God had created light and darkness, the heavenly bodies, the earth and all its plants, animals, birds, and fishes. Finally, God had created Adam and, as an afterthought, Eve, to keep man from being lonely. Man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes. And, although man's body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God's image. Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. As early as the 2nd century both *Tertullian* and *Saint*

Irenaeus of Lyons were insisting that when God shaped Adam, he was foreshadowing the image of the incarnate Christ, the Second Adam. Man shares, in great measure, God's transcendence of nature. Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient ***paganism*** and Asia's religions (except, perhaps, ***Zoroastrianism***), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends. At the level of the common people this worked out in an interesting way. In ***Antiquity*** every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit. These spirits were accessible to men, but were very unlike men; centaurs, fauns, and mermaids show their ambivalence. Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated. By destroying pagan ***animism***, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects... What we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man-nature relationship. More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one.

1.1.1.1 Glossary

linear - progressing from one stage to another, sequential, in this case 'not cyclical'

Tertullian (d. 240 CE) - a prolific Christian author from Africa

Saint Irenaeus of Lyons (d. 202 CE) – a Greek Christian bishop known for bringing Christianity to what is now the south of France and his development of Christian theology

Paganism – originally from 'paganus' [Lat.] meaning peasant it was reclaimed by Contemporary Pagans - for its pejorative meaning, to refer to pre-Christian beliefs

Zoroastrianism – the state religion of the Persian Empire for more than a millennium (c. 600 BCE to 650 CE)

antiquity – the ancient past; the period of cultural history between the 8th century BCE and the 6th century CE centered on the Mediterranean Sea, known as the Greco-Roman world

animism – belief that all things—animals, plants, rocks, rivers—are animated and alive

1.1.2 Check your understanding

1) Highlight or underline what White describes as a Judeo-Christian attitude towards the planet.
2) What does White mean by saying Christianity is 'anthropocentric'?
3) What does White suggest is the solution to our present ecological crisis?
4) What other worldviews does White compare to the Judeo-Christian worldview? Highlight in the text.

1.1.3 Discussion

In support of White's argument

Obviously, religion and specifically Christianity by itself is not to blame for the ecological crisis or climate change – at a very basic level it seems clear that problems of pollution and loss of biodiversity are not confined to Christian countries, or indeed caused by Christians alone, so the problem must be bigger than one tradition or worldview. Nevertheless, anthropocentrism – which has roots in Judeo-Christian thought according to Lynn White Jr. – does run contrary to the kind of outlook needed to address climate change, because it stresses the separateness of humans from the rest of nature instead of stressing the interconnectedness of humans with the natural world and creation. However, some might argue that humanity's 'dominion' over the natural world is only half the picture in Genesis.

How do many Christians understand Genesis?

We will see how Green Christians respond to climate change and the ecological crisis later in this pack, but in a nutshell many Christians would point out that the creation story in Genesis indicates a relationship of care and stewardship towards animals and plants and not one of dominion. In the next activity we consider what another prominent scholar says about the story of Genesis.

1.2 Nahum Sarna's historical interpretation of the Book of Genesis

Let's consider now a different scholarly perspective on the Judeo-Christian story of creation, this time by looking at the analysis of the renowned Jewish – American biblical scholar Nahum Sarna (1923 – 2005). Sarna's critique is not about anthropocentrism, but it is an attempt to make sense of Genesis in its historical and cultural context – something we are keen to emphasize in this course. Whilst Lynn White Jr. compares the text of Genesis with stories and texts from all over the world, Sarna places the text of the Book of Genesis in its specific cultural milieu: that of the ancient Near-East (today's Middle East). Sarna's interpretation will help with having a more nuanced understanding of text in relation to historical and cultural context, which in turn is a very important approach when looking at the diverse Christian responses to environmental issues and climate change.

Sarna's argument has implication for the notion of anthropocentrism. Like Lynn White Jr., Sarna also traces the development of what Lynn White Jr. describes as an

'anthropocentric' perspective. However, he shows that the human empowerment that is evident in Genesis needs to be seen in relation to earlier and neighboring cosmologies. By considering this development we get to consider that the preceding worldviews to those represented by the biblical story of creation, were not necessarily 'more ecological' (although in some cases this may have been the case), but Sarna argues that stories in the ancient Near-East depict a cosmological view where humans had a lowly, deprived status and found themselves at the whim of the gods. Thus, Sarna argues that the stories in the Book of Genesis signal a shift in how humans see themselves in relationship with the cosmos, by gaining a special kind of 'human dignity'.

In what follows we will outline Sarna's argument about how the stories in the Book of Genesis should be interpreted, namely in relation to cosmological views and literary traditions in the Ancient Near East, rather than, rather randomly, mythologies from around the world. This section does not have a reading, instead we break down his argument by looking at his discussion of two ancient texts that preceded the recording of the biblical text: The Epic of Gilgamesh and Enuma Elish. We will then invite you to compare the very different interpretations of White Jr. and Sarna and conclude Lesson 1 with a general discussion and some final questions.

In his extensive study of the Book of Genesis, Nahum Sarna states that the Book of Genesis, as the first out of 24 books or chapters of the Hebrew Bible, needs to be understood in the complex historical and literary context of Ancient Israel. What is more, the Hebrew Bible represents only a small surviving fragment from the total literary production of Israel, which means that our interpretation of the text is also incomplete (Sarna, 1966: xvii). The criticism, although not directly addressed to Lyn White, clearly shows that scholars like Lynn White Jr. often fail to consider the broader context of the literature of the Ancient Middle East or the Ancient Near East. This literary and cultural context is of paramount importance because we need to consider how biblical texts seek to distinguish themselves from those of neighboring cultures. In other words, to make sense of ancient texts we need to know the concerns and pressures of their time.

Sarna's work shows us how the biblical literature needs to be understood in its local cultural context. Genesis asserts a different kind of relationship between humans and nature than other creation stories in the cultural vicinity. Remember that White

compares Genesis to stories of creation from around the world, but not its neighbours in the Ancient Near East (today's Middle East).

1.2.1 The Epic of Gilgamesh and 'Enuma Elish'

There are numerous parallels between mythological stories from Israel's neighbors, that attest to influences between different cultures living in the Ancient Near East, at the time when the cities of ancient Mesopotamia dominated this region (see the map on page 8). We can recognize many biblical themes from the story of Genesis in two of the oldest preserved Mesopotamian texts: The Epic of Gilgamesh (c. 1800-2000 BCE) and 'Enuma Elish' (c. 1750 BCE).

We can identify in these texts many of the themes in the story of creation from the Book of Genesis, which modern biblical scholars understand to be, in comparison, a much more recent text (probably dating from the 6th or 5th centuries BCE).

Chaos Monster and Sun God, Enuma Elish, c. 8th c. BCE

The Ancient Near East c. 6th BCE – showing the proximity and connections between the ancient city of Jerusalem and those of ancient Mesopotamia, Babylon and Uruk, at the time when the Book of Genesis is believed to have been written.

The Epic of Gilgamesh is considered humanities' oldest surviving literary text. We find themes from this Epic of Gilgamesh echoed in Genesis. In the Epic, the goddess Aruru creates a wild man, Enkidu, destined to stop Gilgamesh, the legendary King of Uruk from exploiting his people. Some similarities to biblical themes in the story of Genesis include: a story of sexual initiation (paralleling that of Adam and Eve), followed by a loss of innocence and becoming wise like the Gods. A key theme is the pursuit of the 'plant of life', which is sought by Gilgamesh in order to bring Enkidu back from his death. Here is how the secret of the plant is revealed to Gilgamesh in the Epic:

> "Gilgamesh, you came here exhausted and worn out.
> What can I give you so you can return to your land?
> I will disclose to you a thing that is hidden! Gilgamesh, I will tell you.
> There is a plant like a boxthorn, whose thorns will prick your hand like a rose.
> If your hands reach that plant, you will become a young man again."
> Gilgamesh, Tablet XI, The Story of the Flood

Gilgamesh does find the plant of life but is tricked by the snake and the story ends with a reflection and acceptance of mortality – this last contrasting the emphasis on morality, rather than mortality, in the biblical story of creation. Similarly, in the

Enuma Elish, its title being its opening line, meaning 'When on High', we find a story of the creation of the Earth from the chaos of a watery abys, in which monsters and gods fight for supremacy and the Earth itself is created from the act of slaying a watery monster. Importantly, like in other creation stories, the status of humans in this primaeval world is that of slaves to the gods.

1.2.2 Check your understanding

1. **Look at the map. Can you name the modern countries that occupy the same territory as some of these ancient civilizations: Babylon, Judah, Assyria, Phoenicia?**
2. **What surrounding cultures do the Hebrew creation stories draw on?**
3. **Can you identify one similarity and one difference between one of the two Mesopotamian stories and the Hebrew creation stories in Genesis?**
4. **Having considered Lynn White Jr's critique do you think that we can trace the roots of our ecological crisis in a religious tradition, and specifically Christianity? Why? Why not?**
5. **What does Nahum Sarna's discussion of the Book of Genesis tell us about understanding religious text in a particular cultural context? How is this relevant to religious attitudes today?**

1.2.3 Discussion

Lynn White Jr' s critique encouraged a lot of discussion inside the Christian tradition, especially among Christian writers who wished to defend Christianity and often point out the ecological teachings already present in the tradition. White's critique on the anthropocentrism implicit in the Judeo-Christian tradition – whilst valuable and notable for its overall positive effect on many Christian writers – fails to recognise both the complex cultural landscape in which these ideas developed and the plurality and diversity inside the Christian tradition. Scholars like Nahum Sarna argue that we must pay attention to how **the biblical story of creation distinguishes itself from the principal worldview in antiquity, in which humans occupy a lowly and oppressed status.**

Sarna argues that we see in the biblical story of creation an important innovation: in contrast with the stories of creation in its cultural vicinity, like the Enuma Elish, evil is no longer a part of creation. We do not have an evil force or a monster that needs to

be slayed in order for the world to be created, and hence the world becomes a moral universe. Moreover, Sarna claims, that with the story of Genesis, humans themselves gain a 'special dignity', as they become the 'climax of creation'. Yet, this does involve a separation from nature, given that the gods in these earlier mythologies were often a physical part of the landscape: mountains, rivers, forests, groves.

LESSON 2 ECO-CENTRIC/ NATURE CENTRED WORLDVIEWS: ANIMISM AND GAIA THEORY

In this lesson we explore two alternative worldviews to anthropocentrism, which can be defined as eco-centric or nature centred approaches: first 'animism', an ecological worldview inspired by indigenous religions and British environmentalist James Lovelock's Gaia theory. Among the early proponents of eco-centric ethics and worldviews, the American environmentalist writer Aldo Leopold first began to think about a 'land ethic' (1947), recognising that we needed to see nature and the land as having value in their own right (and not because they were valuable for us humans); similarly the Norwegian writer Arne Næss, first formulated the principles of what he called 'deep ecology' (1972), an ethical system that could replace our deeply seated anthropocentric worldview with an ecological understanding of the world.

Thus, the objective of this lesson is to explore alternatives to anthropocentrism, which emphasize different and more equal relationships between human beings and other beings – as we will see in the next reading Graham Harvey refers to these as 'other-than-human beings'. Alternative viewpoints which developed with the green movement since the 1970s, were understood as 'eco-centric' or 'bio-centric', representing perspectives that emphasize the interdependence of the ecosystem or biotic community, in which human beings do not occupy a central or privileged position.

2.1 Prof Graham Harvey on animism

According to Graham Harvey, a Professor in Religious Studies at The Open University, 'animism' is an example of an eco-centric religion inspired by indigenous worldviews. Moreover, Harvey claims that animism goes beyond eco-centrism, given that animism is not focused on a *centre*, but is instead concerned with 'acts and relationships'. Thus, animism is the idea that everything in the world is alive or animate. Rather than seeing living things in a hierarchy with humans at the top, animists regard all creatures – whether these are rivers, mountains or butterflies – as equally valuable and interdependent in the vast web of life. Let's investigate this view in more depth by reading a short excerpt from Harvey's work on animism, namely his article 'Animism and Ecology: Participating in the World Community'.

Animism has become a popular topic in recent decades. In academia it has been the subject of significant multi and interdisciplinary research, especially but not only of the ethnographic [meaning fieldwork or research with people] kind. [...] One significant thread running through many of these discussions concerns the question of where animism stands in relation to the distinction between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. In this article, I argue that whilst anthropocentrism is certainly inimical to animism (and vice versa), ecocentrism can fail to resonate with significant aspects of animist acts and relations. [...] Conversations with and among Indigenous people (including scholars, activists, artists, performers, friends and casual contacts) and their relations (human and other-than-human) inspire and provoke my own pursuit of better understanding. An initiatory experience for this phase of my life and work occurred when an eagle flew a perfect circle over a drum group at a key moment in the first powwow [a gathering or festival held by an indigenous community] at the Miawpukek (Mi'kmaq) First Nation (Conne River, Newfoundland) in 1996. In following conversations, I heard that the community received this eagle's flight as a confirmation and affirmation of the celebration and re-assertion of their Indigeneity. Among other matters, it impressed me as a clear example of inter-species communication, ritualizing and gift-giving. While grateful for lessons taught by Indigenous people and by other-than-human persons, I also acknowledge the impact of similar experiences among some [Contemporary] Pagan animists who also wish to re-make human relations to respect multi-species communities.

Animism, then, is deeply implicated both in scholarly efforts to understand diverse modes of world-making (those of some Indigenous peoples and of some, perhaps 'eco-centric', Pagans and activists) and also in those actual activities. In both cases, a key

question is what it might mean to be human in a multi-species world. At their most exciting, academic and wider animism debates are about species as relations and about relations between species. As the shockwave of the Anthropocene affects all life on Earth, questions about human relationships with(in) the larger-than-human community are urgent and provocative.

Defining 'animism'

Broadly speaking, there are three competing uses of the term 'animism'.

1st) The oldest comes from the work of Edward Tylor (occupant of the first chair in anthropology at Oxford University in the UK). Under the heading of 'animism', in his Primitive Culture (1871) he proposed that all religions are definitively characterized by "belief in spirits." Our early human ancestors, he claimed, mistakenly interpreted their dreams and other empirical experiences as evidence of the existence of certain metaphysical entities (e.g., animating souls and spirits of rocks, trees, animals, tools, the dead and other putatively inert matter). All religions have continued this 'error' which, Tylor thought, would ultimately be replaced by proper scientific empiricism. In this interpretation, 'animism' is thus seen as an anthropomorphism – the projection of putative human-likeness or agency onto non-human beings or phenomena.

2nd) A second use of 'animism' is as an alternative label for Indigenous 'traditional religions', usually contrasted with monotheisms such as Christianity or Islam. Most often, this usage is similar to that of Tylor in the way it emphasizes metaphysics – contrasting beliefs about a singular deity with beliefs about multiple spirits (e.g. intermediary deities, ancestors, guardians or demons). This usage forces animism to fit the 'world religions paradigm', which skews the ways in which it is described and theorized.

3rd) In recent decades, 'animism' has come to mean something quite different: the understanding that the world is a community of persons, most of whom are not human, but all of whom are related, and all of whom deserve respect (Harvey, 2013b; 2017). In this approach, questions about what defines life (e.g. the possession of souls, spirits, minds, intentionality or agency) have been replaced by questions about what behaviours constitute respect when persons of different species interact. [...]

Primarily, this approach emphasizes relationality: the notion that personhood is not the possession of a certain sort of non-relational, interior property (e.g., being self-conscious, or having a spirit or mind), but is instead constituted by interactions between beings. That is, rather than think in terms of individuality or selfhood, animistic [perspectives] view persons as constituted by the shifting interactions of continuously negotiable relational acts. [...]

2.1.1 Check your understanding

1) Read the three definitions of 'animism'. Shorten each of these definitions of animism to 5 words each.

2) Design icons to represent anthropocentrism and ecocentrism.

3) Take 5 minutes to reflect: Eco-centric perspectives, as opposed to anthropocentric perspectives, consider humans to be just another being in the rich tapestry of nature. Harvey maintains that animism goes beyond eco-centrism, since it is not so much concerned with preservation or conservation, or even a 'centre', but with relationships of respect between all persons, which he understands as both humans and 'other-than-human'. Can you think of relationships you have with non-human persons?

2.2 An alternative eco-centric worldview: the Gaia Theory

Before concluding Lesson 2 we will examine one more alternative eco-centric worldview that became established in the 1970s with the work of James Lovelock (b. 1919), a British scientist and environmentalist. Lovelock is known today as 'the father of Gaia theory', since he hypothesised in the 1970s that the biosphere of the earth functioned as a self-regulating organism, which he controversially called Gaia, like the Earth goddess of the ancient Greeks, which provoked criticism in the scientific community due to its religious implications.

2.2.1 Interview with James Lovelock

Please watch this short OpenLearn interview with James Lovelock or read the transcript below, in which he explains his Gaia theory and what inspired him in naming the biosphere. As you watch please jot down or underline (if you are reading the transcript below) the words he uses to speak about the Earth.

Link: http://bit.ly/gaia_james_lovelock

Transcript:

James Lovelock: ***I see the Earth as more than just a mixture of living things and inanimate matter. I see it as a tightly coupled entity where the evolution of the living***

things and the evolution of the inorganic matter constitute a single and totally inseparable process. It's a whole system. Somehow or other life appeared on Earth. I don't give a damn if it was somebody put it here, whether it was a waste bin cast aside by some visiting spacecraft, or whether God fiddled around with the chemicals and started it, or whether it dropped out from space as Fred Hoyle would have us believe. Somehow or other it started here. At that time the Earth must have been just right for a little, otherwise it wouldn't have survived, but the Earth was evolving geochemically and quite remorselessly towards, although it would take a long time, a state like Mars or Venus, and utterly impossible for life. So life arrived just at the right moment, so to speak. Gaia is the name that I give to the system that is the Earth's, it's also the name of the theory of the Earth as a system, which is I suppose saying the same thing in other words. Gaia got its name in the oddest of ways.

Many years ago I used to live in a village called Bower Chalke in southern Wiltshire, and a near neighbour of mine was that novelist, William Golding, and he and I were good friends, and we used to go for walks around the village talking about philosophical things and that, and when the idea of Gaia came into my mind – I didn't call it Gaia then of course – I was telling him about it, how I thought the Earth was a self-regulating system and that the organisms somehow were involved in this process of self-regulation - and he rather liked the idea, and he said to me well, you'd better give it a proper name, so I said what do you suggest? He said I'd call it Gaia, and for twenty minutes we walked on, I was very puzzled because I thought he'd said the word 'G-Y-R-E', those great whirls that go round and round in the ocean, and I could see that it was a circular thought that I had in my mind, and I thought 'gyre' was going a bit far, and then he suddenly said no, no, no, I meant 'G-A-I-A', Gaia, the Greek name for the Earth's goddess, and of course that I accepted.

2.2.2 Check your understanding

1) **Return to Lynn White: remind yourself of White's argument for where an anthropocentric worldview came from. What is anthropocentrism? Which religious tradition did White argue was responsible for establishing an anthropocentric worldview and how did this happen?**
2) **What is eco-centrism? Where can we find eco-centric worldviews?**
3) **Can you identify some similarities and difference between Gaia theory and animism?**

2.2.3 Discussion

These first lessons in this course invited you to consider a key critique from historian Lynn White Jr. (1967) about the historical root of our ecological crisis being located in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and specifically in the stories of creation in the Book of Genesis. This critique has reverberated for many years, by many other scholars. In order to help you gain a deeper critical understanding, we also introduced an alternative historical interpretation, this time from Nahum Sarna (1966), a biblical scholar who carefully considered the literary and cultural context for the Book of Genesis, and argued that the centrality of human beings in the story signals a (it is implied positive) change in human identity, whereby humans gain a 'special dignity' in a cosmos that was previously perceived as dominated by uncontrollable forces.

Lessons 2 in this course aimed to invite us to think about different, alternative, eco-centric worldviews to anthropocentrism, as we considered animism, a worldview inspired by indigenous religious traditions and popular with some contemporary writers, and the Gaia theory – a scientific theory which developed in the 1970s that sees the Earth as one self-regulating entity: Gaia. The controversy caused by naming the biosphere demonstrates the religious implications of environmentalism. We will have a chance to address this topic over the next two lessons, as we will investigate Christian attitudes and beliefs to the environment more closely.

We should point out here that many Christian theologians made it their life work to respond to the Lynn White Jr. critique and in the process, they become eco-theologians. The Christian theological response is diverse but, as we will see in the next lesson when we read from Pope Francis' public letter on the environment (2015), eco-theologians often stress the fact that the stories in the Book of Genesis can be understood to promote an attitude of 'stewardship' – meaning care and service – to the rest of creation.

LESSON 3 CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO CLIMATE CHANGE

How have different Christian groups and communities responded to the ecological and climate crisis? Lynn White Jr.'s argument about the anthropocentric worldview of the Christian tradition is philosophical or theoretical, but is there a legacy of such an anthropocentric perspective inside contemporary Christian churches and communities? What are Christian churches and communities actually doing on the ground? This lesson will examine some Christian responses to the ecological and climate crisis, highlighting the diversity of the Christian tradition.

Many prominent Christians have made it their mission to take action on climate change. The ruler of the Catholic Church in Vatican City, Pope Francis, has become an important public voice on the climate crisis. His open letter – known as a papal encyclical – 'Laudato Si' (Lat. Praised Be You), 'On the Care of Our Common Home', has been universally praised, inside and outside of the Catholic tradition, for its firm call to global action on climate change.

Many Christian organisations, like CAFOD (Catholic international development charity) and Christian Aid, have become in the last couple of decades, leaders of a movement for 'climate justice', as they have included climate change to their ongoing campaigns against poverty. Many Christian communities, like the Quakers, are committed advocates for climate justice, arguing that the 'unity of creation' is threatened by climate change and that failing to take action represents an 'injustice to future generations'.

However, there are some *evangelical Christian groups* such as the Cornwall Alliance in the USA who have produced resources to argue against climate change, including films and websites. For example, according to Dr E. Calvin Beisner of the Cornwall Alliance, 'environmentalism isn't a neutral set of ideas that can be tacked onto the Christian faith without

Christian evangelicals in the US

In the United States, the evangelical movement gained prominence in the 19th century. Evangelicals comprise nearly a quarter of the US population, and come from different Protestant denominations, such as Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, Reformed and nondenominational churches. They share a conservative interpretation of the biblical text and an emphasis on the importance of 'evangelism' or preaching the gospel.

theological compromise,' because 'it promotes its own worldview and its own doctrines of God, creation, humanity, sin, and salvation. And those doctrines aren't Biblical.'

Why do you think there are such divergent views and interpretations among Christians, over climate change? Is it because different Christian communities interpret the Bible differently, or even because they have different political allegiances? The activities in this lesson will look at divergent Christian responses to climate change.

3.1 'On the Care of our Common Home'

In this activity we will consult a primary source, a short excerpt from Pope Francis' encyclical letter 'Laudato Si' On the Care for Our Common Home. The 'letter' is almost 200 pages long, but we will only read a few paragraphs. As we read, highlight in the text any mention of human attitudes towards the environment. We will come back to look at them once we have read the text. You can also underline key words, jot down important points, and think back at how Lynn White Jr. presented his argument on the religious, Judeo-Christian, roots of our ecological crisis in Lesson 1.

'Laudato Si', Pope Francis, 2015

'The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change. The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home. Here I want to recognize, encourage and thank all those striving in countless ways to guarantee the protection of the home which we share. Particular appreciation is owed to those who tirelessly seek to resolve the tragic effects of environmental degradation on the lives of the world's poorest. Young people demand change. They wonder how anyone can claim to be building a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded. I urgently appeal, then, for a

new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all. [...]

The creation accounts in the book of Genesis contain, in their own symbolic and narrative language, profound teachings about human existence and its historical reality. They suggest that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself. According to the Bible, these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin. The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations. This in turn distorted our mandate to "have dominion" over the earth (cf. Gen 1:28), to "till it and keep it" (Gen 2:15).

We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us. This allows us to respond to the charge that Judaeo-Christian thinking, on the basis of the Genesis account which grants man "dominion" over the earth (cf. Gen 1:28), has encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature by painting him as domineering and destructive by nature. This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church. Although it is true that we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures. The biblical texts are to be read in their context, with an appropriate *hermeneutic*, recognizing that they tell us to "till and keep" the garden of the world (cf. Gen 2:15). "Tilling" refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while "keeping" means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature. Each community can take from the bounty of the earth whatever it needs for subsistence, but it also has the duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations. "The earth is the Lord's" (Ps 24:1); to him belongs "the earth with all that is within it" (Dt 10:14).

3.1.1.1 Glossary

Hermeneutic: meaning an appropriate interpretation, which pays attention to language and context

Scriptures: in this case the Christian sacred writings

3.1.2 Check your understanding

1) What does Pope Francis argue are the roots of the climate and ecological crisis?
2) How does Pope Francis present the creation accounts in Genesis?
3) How do Pope Francis' views differ from both Sarna and White's? Draw a Venn diagram with three circles: Francis, Sarna and White. Can you identify views that only each of these three men hold? Can you identify points of connection or shared views?
4) How does Pope Francis understand the word 'dominion' and what are the implications for human beings and their relationship with God and the Earth?
5) Take 5 minutes to reflect on Pope Francis' words about young people and their future on the planet.
6) What is your reaction to this reading from 'Laudato Si'? What would you like to say to Pope Francis?

3.2 Christianity, Climate Change and Politics in the United States

Having considered Pope Francis' global appeal to addressing the climate crisis, we will turn now to a case study of some evangelical Christians in the United States who oppose action on climate change. This activity aims to highlight that an important consideration when looking at the relationship between religion and climate change is represented by politics. As it is often the case in many countries around the world, American 'politics' and 'religion' are deeply connected and shaping each other. Often church congregations have particular political allegiances, and in the United States, many Christian evangelical churches are politically conservative, being traditionally supporters of the Republican party and distancing themselves from 'environmentalism', which is considered 'too far on the left' of the political spectrum.

Please read the following excerpt from an academic article about the position on climate change of a large evangelical coalition in the US, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). The authors show here how what SBC says on this subject of climate change, changed over time: from initially being sympathetic towards environmental concerns to increasingly distancing themselves from that position.

'Having distanced themselves theologically from what they saw as pre-Christian religion (paganism), these two documents went on to present more purely secular anti-environmental and climate denialist talking points. The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission Policy Statement on Global Warming stated that 'thousands of scientists agree that there is no conclusive evidence for the manmade global warming theory. Records prove that climates have changed in the past without human interaction. The statement warned that the Kyoto Protocol, if implemented, would have disastrous effects on the economy including job losses and increased poverty. The 2006 Southern Baptist Convention resolution repeated climate skeptics favorite arguments but went even further, approvingly talking of respecting ownership and property rights and opposing solutions that bar access to natural resources and unnecessarily and restrict economic development. In less than four decades, then, the Southern Baptists moved from sounding quite sympathetic to environmentalism, including support for stronger government regulation, to equating environmentalism with neo-paganism and endorsing free enterprise. Today, the official position of Southern Baptists, and of other conservative Christians, is indistinguishable from that of secular conservatives in the climate denial movement' (Zaleha and Szasz, 2015).

Only two years after expressing the above position in their Policy statement, in 2008, a group of Christians inside the Southern Baptist Church attempted to shift their position on this matter. Please read the excerpt from a CNN article (2008) commenting on this development:

'Several prominent leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention said Monday that Baptists have a moral responsibility to combat climate change - a major shift within a denomination that just last year cast doubt on human responsibility for global warming. "We can do better" in responding to climate change, some members of the Southern Baptist Convention say.

Forty-six influential members of the Southern Baptist Convention, including three of its past four presidents, criticized their denomination in a statement Monday for being "too timid" in confronting global warming. "Our cautious response to these issues in the face of mounting evidence may be seen by the world as uncaring, reckless and ill-informed," the statement says. "We can do better."

The Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, adopted a resolution last year urging Baptists to "proceed cautiously in the human-induced global warming debate in light of conflicting scientific research." The resolution said "many scientists reject the idea of catastrophic human-induced global warming."

3.2.1 Check your understanding

1) Draw a timeline across your page, mark 4 points.

   1st. On the first point, write the SBC's initial reaction to action on climate change.

   2nd. According to Zaleha and Szasz, what was the SBC's reason for objecting to measures to combat climate change? What did they prioritise instead? Make a note of their response and add to the second point of your timeline.

   3rd. Mark '2007' as the third point on your timeline. The CNN article was written in 2008. You will have to read carefully, but what view still existed in the SBC in 2007? Record this on your timeline.

   4th. Mark '2008' as the fourth point on your timeline. Write a brief note to describe how the SBC's view shifted on climate change after 2008.

2) Please jot down a few of the reasons highlighted in these academic and media sources, which described the Southern Baptist Convention's justifications for both action and inaction in relation to climate change?

Reasons for action on climate change	… inaction on climate change

3.2.2 Discussion and further questions

The objective in this lesson was to demonstrate the plurality of responses and interpretation inside the diverse Christian tradition, where we find multiple communities with very different interpretations of the Bible, but also different political allegiances, as the case study on Christian evangelicals in the US shows. Second, the readings in this lesson were chosen in order to ask you to consider the religious dimension of climate change and that the ways different religious communities talk about and act on climate change may be connected to a range of religious beliefs, political loyalties and economic interests (i.e., access to fossil fuels). The examination of the above *primary a*nd *secondary sources* shows the controversy inside one and the same evangelical organization in the United States, the Southern Baptist Convention, with different positions towards climate changes being expressed by different members, at different times.

Primary sources are materials and artefacts created during or near the time that you are researching, or by someone with direct experience of the events they relate to. They include letters, manuscripts, newspapers and diaries, photographs, paintings and iconography, film and even buildings.

Secondary sources are things written about primary sources, providing context and interpretation.

Please reflect on how the issue of climate change is creating controversy inside some religious communities. These are things to keep in mind as we move on to the next lesson.

- **How do we know a particular Christian group's position on acting on Climate change? Who do you think speaks on behalf of a religious organisation or community? Is it a religious leader, like Pope Francis, who represents the position of the Catholic church? Or perhaps key organizations inside the Catholic community, such as CAFOD?**
- **Are individual Catholics representing the plurality of voices inside the tradition? What does the CNN article suggest about different positions inside a religious community on a major issue like climate change?**

To explore these questions further we will turn now to Green Christian organisations in the UK, who represent Christian charities and independent networks, operating both outside and inside church communities.

LESSON 4 A CASE STUDY: GREEN CHRISTIANS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

In this lesson you will consolidate your knowledge, as we examine Green Christian beliefs, practices, and actions on the backdrop of the new concepts introduced by the last few lessons. As we have seen in the previous lesson, big Christian organisations, like CAFOD and Christian Aid, are already campaigning for 'climate justice', whilst big international Christian environmental organisations like *A Rocha* have successfully brought green concerns into churches in the UK and internationally, through such programmes as Eco-church and Eco-congregation – which encourage congregations to adopt green initiatives in their church communities. Also as discussed in Lesson 3, we have seen that Pope Francis, like many other religious leaders, have become public voices for climate change and the ecological crisis. But alongside these religious leaders we can find a variety of Green Christian grassroots or independent networks, who have made climate change and the ecological crisis their foremost concern. This is a 'bottom up' eco-reformation – as some scholars have described the greening of church communities, led by the efforts of ordinary Christians to reach out to Christian communities and churches, as well as the wider unengaged public. In this final lesson we draw on the empirical research of Dr Maria Nita at the Open University (see for example Nita, 2016, 2018, 2020) to examine Green Christian initiatives in the United Kingdom, their prayers, rituals and actions.

4.1 Green Christians in the UK

In this activity we are concerned with practices rather than texts, namely the Christian practices developed by Green Christian organisations and charities that have started in the UK. There are many such groups and communities around the United Kingdom, such as Green Spirit, the Forest Church, Operation Noah, and one of the most influential environmental grassroots Christian organisation, the Green Christian charity, previously Christian Ecology Link founded in 1982. The Green Christian organisation has had an incredibly active role, particularly in England, through local groups, workshops, conferences, retreats, and more recently, numerous online events. They produce numerous publications, both in print and online, such as a magazine, *Green Christian*, and an annual brochure, 'Storm of Hope', alongside a website with a rich content of prayers, programmes and campaigns. Given that most Christian organisations are charities their political action is limited – since charities cannot be engaged in some protest and lobbying actions – yet a new Christian organisation,

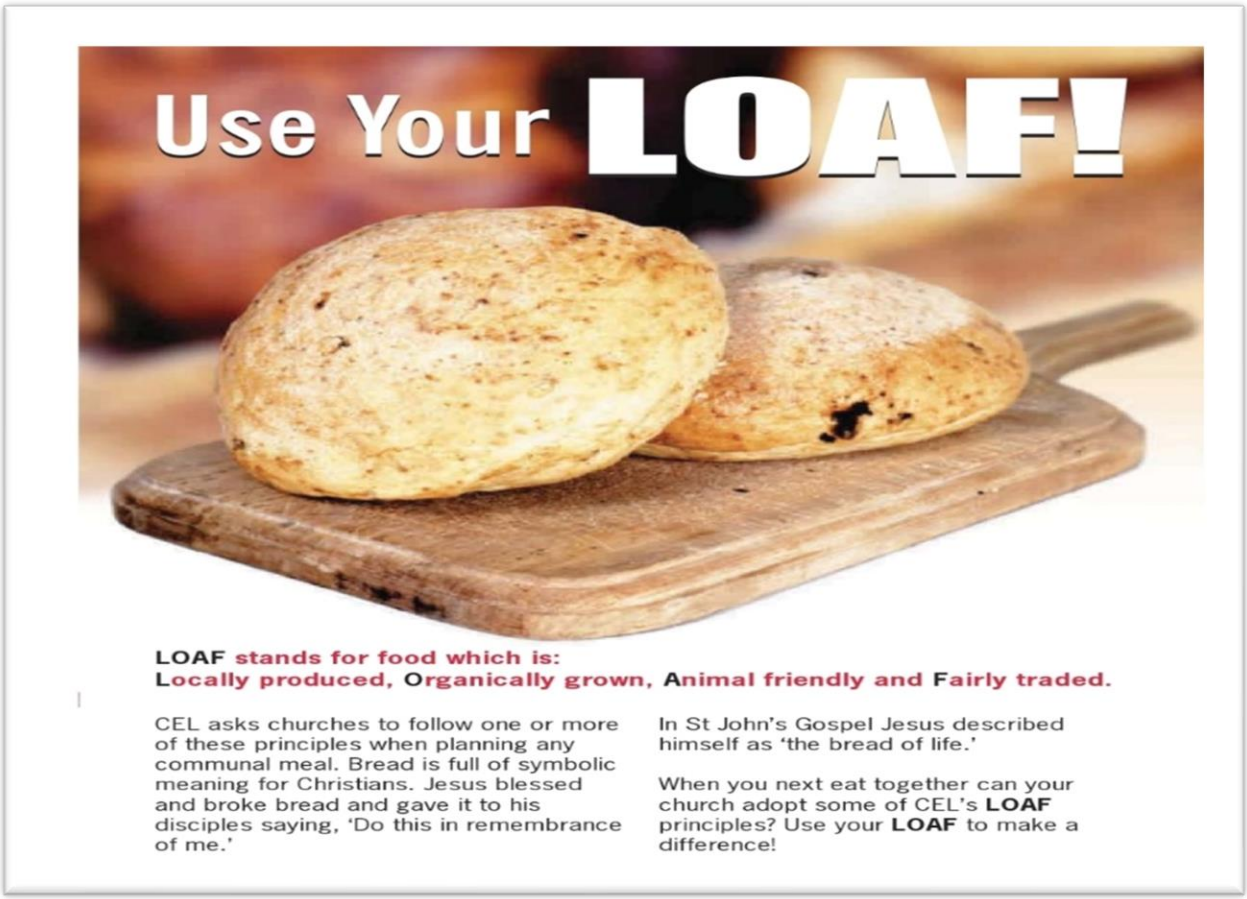
Christian Climate Action (founded 2014) is fully focused on climate activism and has joined the Extinction Rebellion movement, which has been organising public protests around the world since 2018.

First we look at a Green Christian educational campaign for sustainable food, 'Use your Loaf!', and second we will examine a protest action with Christian climate activists, when Green Christians celebrate the Holy Communion, a Christian sacrament accepted by almost all Christians, during an Extinction Rebellion protest.

4.1.1 Use your LOAF!

Among their actions, the Green Christian organisation in the UK began a campaign called 'Use Your LOAF!' Please read the leaflet and the paragraph from the GC website explaining what is meant by animal friendly, before you consider a few questions about this material.

'An animal-friendly diet means different things to different people. For some it will mean a completely animal-free diet which excludes dairy-products and eggs as well as meat and fish. Others are vegetarian. For others, being animal-friendly means avoiding intensively farmed produce and going for free-range and organic food where



the animals have been treated with care and respect. Even if you choose to eat meat and dairy, there are two big reasons for eating less of it. A whopping 18%, that's nearly one fifth, of greenhouse gas emissions come from livestock farming, mostly from cattle and from the deforestation to grow their feed. To stabilise our climate we all need to eat a lot less meat and dairy than the average UK diet. And, as so often happens, caring for the wellbeing of the planet is also the best option for our own health – diets high in meat and dairy are simply not good for us! And to make it easy to do, free-range and organic does tend to be a little more expensive – which will encourage us to buy less of it and make sure none of it is wasted.'

4.1.2 Check your understanding

1) How is an animal friendly diet connected to Christian values?
2) Which Christian symbol does the LOAF campaign re-purpose?

4.2 Christian Climate Action supporting Extinction Rebellion

The Extinction Rebellion (XR) movement represents the latest expression of the climate movement. XR started on the streets of London in 2018 and has since gained global representation. The focus on extinction was brought about by the publication of the latest scientific report from the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC 2018) which showed that anthropogenic climate change, or climate change caused by human activities, will have dramatic effects, causing mass species extinctions, unless the level of CO_2 in the atmosphere was dramatically reduced over the next 12 years.

Extinction rebellion activists have caused controversy in the media and the public domain. Whilst some commentators have criticised their protest methods, which at times included disrupting traffic and business, others have pointed out that their protests have been largely achieved through Non-Violent Direct Action or NVDA: oftentimes through artistic performances, as it is the case with the red brigade activists represented below, who wish to represent the blood of the species who have been lost due to climate change.

XR Red brigade activists in Bristol 2019

Please watch the following short clip or read the transcript below, where Christian Climate Activists explain their reasons for joining the climate protests and the Extinction Rebellion Movement (XR).

http://bit.ly/Christian_climate_activists

Transcript

'I'm here because it maybe too late in the game, I've been absolutely convinced of the need for action and this is my primary calling right now…'

'As Christians we stand with Extinction Rebellion, we're part of Extinction Rebellion, [and] as a witness, the church needs to be part of this. The Church needs to catch up on this'

'We started off in here which seemed sort of ordinary and okay and safe but then we decided to move to where the police had been moving people, [we are] surrounded by all the noise of the rebellion…'

'In the name of God, creator Redeemer and sustainer, Amen. Now is the time for the Lord to act, we celebrate this Eucharist in solidarity with all of creation, this is where the church should be at this time in history, in the history of humanity. What is the point of the Church if we're not on the streets standing up for God's creation?'

'We offer one another sign of peace... we do need to be here because it is an absolute emergency that we've got ourselves into if it's the least I can do is to be here....'

'The bread of life is broken the cup of salvation is poured out, come eat and drink...'
'Not because you are perfect but because you are loved...'

4.2.1 Check your understanding

1) **How do these Christian climate activists explain their support for the XR movement?**
2) **Given that they are not inside a church building and they are not religious leaders (like Pope Francis), are their voices representative of the Christian tradition? Why? Why not?**

4.3 New Rituals and a New Creation Story

Many Green Christians in the UK connect with nature through new prayers, stories and rituals, such as taking communion in nature and 'praying with trees'. Among other influential Green Christian writers or eco-theologians of the 20th century, Thomas Berry was an American environmentalist who proposed in the 1970s that the story of the evolution of the Universe and the Earth should be read as an epic story, 'the greatest story ever told'. Berry described the geological history of the Earth as a 'new story of creation', published in 1992 with the title 'The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era, A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos'. (Swimme and Berry, 1992). Many Green Christians developed rituals that celebrated this new creation story, rituals such as 'The Cosmic Walk', 'the Universe Story' or 'The Epic Ritual'. The ritual was popularised in the UK by the Green Spirit network, and its model was adapted in many ways, as a reflective walking ritual that brings into scale the age of the Universe and the Earth and the relative short time humans have been a part of the Earth.

The ritual of the Cosmic Walk attempts to tell this great story through a symbolic walk that represents the evolution of our planet. The walker re-enacts this journey by walking a marked spiral and posing for important milestones in the development of the universe. The spiral is made with rope or may be painted on the floor of a large room. The milestones are marked with river stones, candles, posters, providing a timeline for important events – like the emergence of life. During the ritual one person reads from Swimme and Berry's *Universe Story, which* describes the physical

evolution of the universe and the Earth, putting astrophysics, science and history into poetic language.

Contemplative music accompanies this ritual as people taking part in the ritual stop and pause, by lighting candles or picking up stones, in order to reflect on the evolutionary journey of the planet. The last landmarks on this journey, doted very close together on the last few feet of the spiral, tell of recent events in Earth's history. This recent epoch of the Earth's geological history has been called the Anthropocene, in order to refer to the destructive role of human action on the environment, after the Industrial Revolution [from Ancient Greek *ánthrōpos* meaning 'man' or 'human']. Finally, walkers reach the end of the spiral as the narrator says 'Today we tell the story of the universe…. This is our story'.

4.3.1 The Universe Story

Please read the following passage from cosmologist Brian Swimme and cultural historian Thomas Berry (1992). Is this a scientific account or a religious creation story? Construct a brief argument for your answer by jotting down three bullet points.

We wish to know: What came first? What was the beginning? The event before all other events? The time before all other times? We do not know. It may be that we cannot know. And yet we have named it: the Dream, the Mystery, the quantum vacuum, God … Thirteen billion years ago, from that place that was no-place, from that time that was no-time, the cosmos flared forth in a silent blaze of inconceivable brilliance. All the energy that would ever exist in the entire course of time erupted from a point smaller than a grain of sand. Unimaginably vast quantities of elementary particles, light, and space-time itself, unfurled and expanded from this quantum vacuum, this unity of origination. If in the future, stars would blaze and lizards would blink in their light, these actions would be powered by the same numinous energy that burst forth at the dawn of time' (Swimme & Berry, 1992: 7).

This a (either a) scientific account/ or a religious creation story because….
1.
2.
3

4.3.2 Check your understanding

1. Why are there such diverse positions towards climate change and the ecological crisis inside the Christian tradition?
2. How do some Christians writers and theologians understand the creation story?
3. What type of actions do Green Christians take? Are their protests, such as the one we examined in Lesson 4, religious or political activities? Why?
4. Can religion help us address climate change? How?

4.3.3 Discussion

This course aimed to take students on a journey, helping you to appreciate the diversity inside the Christian tradition, by looking at the very different attitudes modern Christians have to climate change and the ecological crisis. In order to do this the course started by examining a key critique of the tradition, coming from Lynn White Jr., claiming that the root of our ecological crisis can be found in the Judeo-Christian tradition and specifically in the biblical stories in the Book of Genesis. The critique proved useful because many Christians writers responded by defending Christianity and finding alternative interpretations, as we have seen in Pope Francis' public letter. Yet what the four lessons in this course have shown is that Christianity is a monolithic term for churches and organisations across the world, who are influenced by very different cultural and political contexts.

The examination of the responses from the Southern Baptist Church vis-à-vis climate change showed that the church adapted its response to changing political influences within the organisation. Their public statement could not be considered the response from US Christians, any more than Pope Francis' 'Laudato Si' can be considered to represent the views of the entire Catholic population. Therefore, we have to question who is speaking for an organization and a religious tradition and consider alternative views. Green Christians in the UK are of course as much representative of the Christian tradition, as other Christians around the world, if we accept that this tradition is represented by a plurality of voices and influenced by a diversity of cultural and political factors.

The material presented here aimed to show that Christian writers and theologians take very different interpretations of the meaning of creation and the purpose of a creation story. Pope Francis rejects the anthropocentric interpretation of the story of creation,

showing that the old understanding of the biblical word 'dominion' as a human right to dominate the Earth needs to be rejected and revised with an understanding of stewardship, a duty to protect nature. Thomas Berry abandons the 'old story of creation' altogether and proposes that the scientific story of the Earth is as magnificent and inspiring. Indeed, new rituals around Berry's new story of creation aimed to create a sense of awe towards the amazing intricacy of the evolution of our planet. Much like Lovelock's Gaia theory, Berry's approach highlights the unity and interdependence of all life on the planet. Such diverse perspectives, coming from Christians and non-Christians alike, are not radically different in their declared environmental purpose, as they all advocate for a change of attitude towards the Earth and call for humans to protect the Earth.

Finally, can religion help us address climate change? Absolutely. Religious traditions, and particularly Christianity in the UK and the West, represent the most influential ethical systems and ideologies behind our past and present legal and political systems. The material we surveilled here shows that religious people, much like non-religious people, have diverse attitudes towards climate change and the environmental crisis, and that these attitudes can, and often are, informed by complex local and global interactions between religion, culture and politics.

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