

What does Christianity have to do with the landscape?

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[0 : 00] I'd like to just indicate what I plan to try to say this evening. I'd like to introduce myself to you. In spite of the glorious introduction that has already been given, there are a few things I would like to make explicit.

Then I'd like to ask, what is this question all about? What does Christianity have to do with the landscape? Okay. Thirdly, I want to look at ways of answering this question. First of all, through personal experience. Secondly, through science. And thirdly, through the Bible. And fourthly, finally, I wish to suggest that Christian engagement with the public debate about global environmental change is urgently needed.

Our salvation history rescues us from the fate of the world, but in many ways isolates us from the public square.

Creation history, in its guise as global environmental change, is one of the central topics of public debate. So first of all, introduction of me to you.

[1 : 21] Aaron asked me to introduce myself as a member of our St. John's congregation, who normally worship here at 7.30, and someone who is involved in the organization of the Learner's Exchange at 9 o'clock on Sunday mornings.

He asked me to give a lecture on a topic about which I was knowledgeable, and which would be of general interest. There are some assumptions here. So I'm giving you a lecture on a topic on which I was certainly knowledgeable for 40 years of my life, but I have to request your forgiveness for memory lapses that have occurred since my retirement as an emeritus professor in 2004.

First of all, a story about something that happened yesterday. I attended the ninth convocation at Quest University in Squamish. It was a grand occasion with folks dressed in colorful academic robes spilling over the VIP platform.

But for me, the most memorable aspect of the whole ceremony was the prayer uttered by Chief Joshua Joseph of the Squamish Nation. It went something like this.

This is a great honor. This is a great honor. This is a great honor. We give you thanks for placing us in this beautiful spot. Your generosity and beauty are reflected in these trees, these rocks, these animals, and these buildings, which have been blessed by the prayers of countless generations.

[2 : 49] That these students may listen to you and learn from their surroundings as well as from their instructors during their coming four-year undergraduate program. This was the welcome to the incoming students at Quest University for this coming year.

Why did this impress me so much? Well, at a time when prayers are being eliminated from our public schools and institutions of higher learning, here was a man courageous enough to speak up for the Creator at a private, not-for-profit, secular institution.

How did we get into this bizarre situation of banning prayer in public institutions? I don't propose to answer this question today, but I'd like you to bear it in mind as I try to answer the question advertised.

What, if any, is the relationship between Christianity and landscape? So my second point, what on earth is this question about? First of all, landscape refers colloquially to the lie of the land and is a word that pops up in many contexts, including architecture, art, literature, and in Vancouver, gardening, in addition to my chosen subject of geography.

More specifically, landscape incorporates the visible features of an area of land, including land forms, ecosystems, and land use, and I am what is known in the trade as a landscape scientist.

[4 : 27] It is by no means rocket science, but it does have a strong bearing on one of the major issues of our time, namely global environmental change. And secondly, there are also many different contexts and understandings of the word Christianity.

For me, as I'm sure for most of you, Christianity is a faith in a God who exists and communicates through the Bible, through his creation, the landscape, and through his people.

And life's purpose is to worship God, our creator and redeemer. And God does indeed care deeply about his creation. Isaiah 24, verses 4 to 5, tells us that the earth mourns and withers.

The world languishes and withers. The highest people of the earth languish. The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants, for they have broken the everlasting covenant, which was read to us just a few moments ago.

So, Jim Houston says in his book, I believe in the creator, that creation is the landscape of the Bible.

[5 : 42] The interconnectedness of God the creator and God the redeemer is a theme that requires, in my view, urgent attention. So this is what I suggest is the nature of the question.

Is there a connectedness? Is there a relationship of substantive sort between God and the landscape and our interaction with it?

So my third point, different ways of answering the question, starting with my personal experience. I'm sure that Aaron would probably prefer that I deal with this in reverse order, my Bible first, and personal experience last.

But I'm going to give you the chronological order in which these answers occurred in my life. Firstly, my personal experience.

At the tender age of six months, I was apparently, I wasn't aware of the details here, but I was taken from Wales, my birthplace, to Norway for a summer holiday with my Norwegian relatives.

[6 : 57] This summer holiday turned into a six-year stay in Nazi-occupied Norway, as we were not permitted to travel back to Wales under wartime conditions. My earliest memories consist of the contrast between the harsh, military, Gestapo-ridden urban environment of the city and the glorious freedom of escape to the forested and wild alpine spaces of Telemark.

My images of landscape and their associations with good and evil, that is, freedom and occupation by an enemy force, were deeply imprinted at an early age.

My return to Wales in 1945 presented me with another set of contrasting landscape images. The physical landscape of Swansea, South Wales, in 1945 was horrific.

The downtown area had been bombed and resembled a lunar landscape and the adjacent rural landscape was scarred, as indeed it still is, by the effects of centuries of copper smelting and coal mining.

Every third year, starting in 1948, my family returned to Norway. There was, for me, a recurring reinforcement of contrasting landscape images.

[8 : 20] It seems clear in retrospect that my early interest in becoming a geographer and specifically a landscape scientist was provoked by these dramatically contrasted images.

I have illustrated my ongoing personal interest in landscape as a setting for field work and for outdoor teaching of students and for personal growth and getting to know my creator better in a number of different ways, particularly through photographic images.

So this seems to me, although obviously from early age, this is a long time ago, 70 years or more, and this seems to me to be the secret of my interest in landscape.

Secondly, then, from the area of landscape science, I selected the subjects of geography, history, and mathematics as my senior grammar school specializations, for it seemed to me that an understanding of landscape would be impossible without geography and history and that the discipline of mathematics could constrain wild speculation.

I've never had occasion to regret that choice, though I have to admit that some of my speculations have indeed been wild. In 1955, at the age of 16, I made a public profession of faith in Jesus through baptism by immersion.

[9 : 59] and I received at the time a copy of a book by a medical doctor, Rendell Short, called Modern Discovery and the Bible. I still have a well-thumbed copy of that book.

Both the public profession of faith and this book emboldened me to write a feature article in my grammar school magazine entitled Why I am a Christian.

It was not, as I now realize, a good article, but it did provoke a public debate in the school. Well, I was preparing myself to become a geographer and how could my faith intersect without objective? Landscape science seemed to have exactly the ingredients that could potentially hold these pursuits together. There is a book that you might be interested in reading by Ronald Blythe, a Church of England clergyman called *Divine Landscapes*.

Blythe says memorably that there is scarcely a field or a hill, let alone a village or a town which cannot be read in both spiritual and material terms.

[11:12] As a budding geographer, I became intrigued by the question of landscape change over time. There are profound ethical implications of the total effect of mankind's modus operandi and its deleterious effect on God's creation.

The landscape is being consumed and overburdened faster than it can be replenished. Some speak proudly of a man-created landscape, but to say so is blasphemy from a materialist perspective is fully understandable and indicates how serious is the defamation of the image of God in his creation.

I could go on at great length about this, but Aaron tells me that we have only an hour and a half for my lecture, so I will forbear. How seriously has the image of God in his creation been compromised by the activities of humankind?

Hosea chapter 4 verses 1 to 3 tells us, Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel, for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness, no love of God, and no knowledge of God in the land.

Therefore, interesting conclusion, therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish together with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and even the fish of the sea are perishing, says Hosea.

[12:42] So these new discoveries are not new. Sounds exactly like the Vancouver sun. Thirdly, the source of this interest in the landscape is, of course, the Bible.

And the two excerpts from the Bible that were just read provided a real incentive to pursue landscape science. But we could just as usefully have read from Job chapter 31 or chapters 39 to 41, Deuteronomy chapter 4, Psalm 19 and 148, Isaiah 40, Hosea 4, or Revelation 21, or I won't go on.

I have not exhausted the range of scriptures which inspire one to pursue landscape science.

Evidently, from our reading from Genesis, God, the Father Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible, is sufficiently interested in landscape as to make a covenant with all living things on the face of the earth.

Then God said to Noah and his sons with him, Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you and with every living creature. And when the bow is in the clouds, I shall see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.

And from Leviticus, we learn that God cares for the earth sufficiently to command that the land be given a sabbatical. You may know that professors cannot survive without a sabbatical.

[14:26] Just the same way the land cannot survive without a sabbatical. It needs to lie fallow one year in every seven. But not only that, the Lord God is sufficiently interested that he wishes to celebrate a year of jubilee after 50 years.

Seven times seven plus one, I believe. That's why I took mathematics in the sixth form. There are many reasons why we, an industrialized urban society, have marginalized these biblical verses as compared with an agricultural subsistence society such as 20th century BC Israel.

But are we indeed not still dependent on the superabundant generosity of God, our creator, with respect to land and all that that implies? The local community that most closely models this view of the land you will know as Arosha and its ethic of creation care.

You may well wish to read the books by Peter Harris called *Under the Bright Wings* and or *King Fisher's Fire* which explain the involvement of this community in nature conservation which stems from a biblical understanding of love, obedience, justice, and hope.

And if you think this sounds suspect, I can say that John Stott recommends this group in his forward to the book *Under the Bright Wings*.

[16:06] When I lived for three weeks on an ice cap in northern Norway together with a professor and two other graduate students, I had a lot of time to reflect on the magnificence of God's creation and the generosity of the one who made it.

I also experienced a fair proportion of awe as the ice groaned and crevasses creaked through the night hours. But the northern lights reminded me of the Noahic covenant which we have just read and the presence of the bow in the clouds.

God's guarantee that he is gracious and loves us and he commands our worship. Finally, questions about Christian engagement with the public debate about global environmental change.

As I mentioned, salvation history rescues us from the fate of the world but possibly isolates us from the public square. Throughout history, we have tended to read the Bible as though human life was all that God was interested in.

The true biblical vision seems to me to be one of all creation flourishing with human beings as God's appointed stewards. The Abrahamic covenant has been emphasized as much more than the Noahic covenant for many obvious and some not so obvious reasons.

[17 : 32] There is not only a salvation history but also a history of creation. My reflection here is that many contemporary Christians have lost interest in the landscape and prefer to live exclusively within the framework of salvation history.

Far be it from me to criticize living within the framework of salvation history. Where would we be without God's plan of salvation? But in some respects, I think you may have experienced, certainly I've found, it is difficult, even impossible at times, to relate God's plan of salvation to the main currents of contemporary thought.

Aha, you say, too bad for contemporary thought. But there is another option. Is it not possible to celebrate two parallel and cognate Christian histories, creation history and salvation history?

The secular world has seized on this lacuna in Western religious thought and with the emergence of evolutionary theory has clung tenaciously to a strange model of random processes in evolution as explanations of the miracle of creation.

The beauty and richness of creation and the mystery of creation have also been co-opted by secularists who omit any consideration of God. My final thought, therefore, is to take us back to my story of the convocation at Quest yesterday.

[19 : 01] I thank God for that brave Squamish chief, but I'm also embarrassed by the way in which many of us Christians have capitulated in the face of materialist perspectives and explanations of landscape that ignore our creator God.

For the past 150 years, our theologians have been busy reinforcing our understanding of the fundamentals of salvation history and thank God for this.

But the secular world has taken command of creation history and reduced it to the expression natural history. It will take a lot of dedicated work by Christian scientists in collaboration with theologians and others to recapture the public square.

Thank you.